Growing In Christ

From Salvation To Eternity

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Introduction

Life as a Christian begins when we hear the gospel, believe in Jesus and are born again by God's spirit. As a new-born baby in Christ, we need to be fed – first on the 'milk' of God's word. Then we need to grow, by feeding on the 'solid' food of God's word. Growth is a sign of life and health.

This present life is preparation for the life to come, when we go to be with Jesus. In this preparation we will need to grow spiritually, in Christ, and overcome three things - the world, the flesh and the devil. With growth and bearing spiritual fruit we will be able to endure the trials and temptations of this life and be prepared for persecution and spiritual deception. Growth takes time and perseverance.

We know that lack of or wrong food and bad habits will impact our body – causing retarded growth, sickness or premature death. So it is with us spiritually. Lack of or wrong spiritual food and bad habits will impede or prevent our growth in Christ.

How do we grow in Christ and what evidence should there be to show that we are '*growing in Christ*'?

I hope that in this book these questions will be addressed and show that God's amazing and gracious salvation in Christ goes much further than to forgive our sins and give us a right to enter his eternal kingdom. It is God's intention that we, having been saved by his grace through faith and born again by his Spirit, not remain as children but also grow by the power of his Spirit.

Growth is God's Intention

As a father and mother rejoice to see their children grow in stature and maturity so our Father in heaven rejoices to see his children grow spiritually into the likeness of his Son, Jesus.

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Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ (Ephesians 4:15 ESV).

As a baby grows naturally from infancy to childhood, adulthood and parenthood, so the Bible teaches we also grow from spiritual birth to maturity in Christ. God has made the natural world to reflect the spiritual. Growth is a sign of life and health. Lack of growth is an indication of spiritual blindness as Peter instructs us:

For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For whoever lacks these qualities is so near-sighted that he is blind, having forgotten that he was cleansed from his former sins (2 Peter 1:5-9 ESV).

The end result of growth is that '*we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ*' (Ephesians 4:13). This growth is revealed as we bear the fruit of the Spirit and become more like Jesus. But we must understand that it is impossible for us to grow and bear the fruit of the Spirit except by our being *in* Christ and he *in* us. Our growth is *in* Christ because it is his life and the power of his Spirit, not ours that enables us to live and grow for him.

That we grow and mature is essential so that we will not, as Paul in his letter to the Ephesians says, be '*tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes*' (Ephesians 4:14). Here Paul warns that poor, false or deceiving teaching will cause us to be led astray and not grow to maturity.

Growing In Christ

Jesus taught us spiritual truths with many illustrations from the natural world known as parables. There are two great parables relating to growth: the parable of the sower and the parable of the vine (Luke 8:4-15 and John 15:1-6) which explain how: 1. we bear the fruit of the Spirit and 2. what can hinder or even prevent this fruit from forming.

In the parable of the sower Jesus told His disciples of four types of soil which reflect the state of our heart. If our heart becomes hardened, shallow in faith or worldly - that is, love for this world and the things of this world rather than the kingdom of God, we will be in spiritual danger. If these are not addressed we will be unequipped to face the trials of this life and hinder or even prevent our growth and bearing the fruit of Christ's spirit in us.

In the parable of the vine Jesus said he is the vine and we are the branches. We must remain spiritually connected to him to bear fruit (see *We Are To Bear Fruit* p 54).

Life in Jesus begins when we repent of our sins and put our faith in Jesus for the forgiveness of our sins. The reality of our faith will be shown in a changed life which the Bible describes as holiness, *without which no one will see the Lord* (Hebrews 12:14). Throughout the New Testament believers, Christians are most often referred to as *saints* or *holy ones*. To be holy simply means to be separated from the ways of sin and of this world for God's purpose. We are able to be holy because by the grace and power of God, through the cross of Christ we are not only saved from the *penalty* of sin but also its *power*.

Scripture warns us that it is possible to *neglect* the great salvation we have in Christ with tragic and eternal consequences (Hebrews 2:1-3). The good news is that through salvation in Christ, God has given us by his grace, the power and strength we need to grow in him and become a holy people. This is not only to ensure our entrance into his eternal kingdom but also that we be light and salt in this world and bring glory to him.

The Source and Power of Growth

To grow we must first be born again by the Spirit of God (John 3:5-7). The source and power of growth is Christ's spirit living in us. As a child needs food to grow so we need spiritual food – the word of God (The Bible). This is crucial for every believer. As Peter says:

Like newborn babies, long for the pure milk of the word, so that by it you may grow in respect to salvation (1 Peter 2:2).

It is through God's word the thoughts and intentions of our heart are judged:

For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart (Hebrews 4:12).

In the apostle Peter's second letter we are encouraged to '*grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ*' (2 Peter 3:18). This growth is necessary lest we be '*carried away by the error of unprincipled men and fall from your own steadfastness*' (3:17). Earlier in Peter's letter we are told that God's power '*has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of him*' (1:3). This knowledge is clearly not just academic but is to be shown in experience, in our lives. Peter goes on to say that if faith, moral excellence, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness and love are *increasing* (that is, growing) we will be fruitful and prepared to enter God's eternal kingdom (1:8-11). Yet it is always through God's Spirit and power we are prepared and equipped.

Understanding who God is and his way with his people is also crucial to our spiritual growth. A false or distorted understanding will prove to be a serious impediment to our spiritual growth. We are urged to know him and Christ, not merely intellectually, but in

experience. God's word is not just to be known but obeyed. As the apostle John says: '*By this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep His commandments*' (1 John 2:3). Both God's *kindness and severity* need to be understood (Romans 11:22). If we emphasise one to the detriment of the other we will inevitably stumble. Truth without grace produces legalism while grace without truth will lead to unholy living.

Growing in Christ will mean loving what Christ loves and hating what he hates, putting aside our old ways and putting on new ways and attitudes. And it is our thinking which first is to change through the renewing of our mind (more on this in '*Living As God's People*' p 37).

Some of what will be said may seem difficult and hard but such things need to be faced honestly if we are to live for Jesus in this world. The Bible encourages us to feed on the solid food of God's word not just the milk, if we are to grow in discernment and maturity (Hebrews 5:12-14). It is my hope that you will be encouraged to grow in your love for God and Christ, increase in faith and holiness, avoid the potential temptations of life in this world, give encouragement to those struggling with sin or trying circumstances and know God's grace and strength are always sufficient.

This is written to encourage you to live for God according to the ability he has given you. It is not that we all must attain to a certain standard but that we put every effort to attain to the standard of life God has revealed to us (2 Peter 1:10). We must run in such a way so as to get the prize (1 Corinthians 9:24). Yet it is not in our own strength but through his Spirit living in us. So don't be discouraged because, as we do, we will know God's peace and inner joy!

What Does It Mean To Be Saved?

It is necessary first to understand what it means to *be saved.* The terms 'being saved' or 'born again' have in some ways become

clichés. We use them often but do we understand their full meaning and implication? What are we saved from and what are we saved for?

Many believe to be saved simply means to be forgiven of our sins, by God's grace through faith in Jesus, and so obtain a right to enter Heaven (true though this is - but there is much more). To others being saved can mean something as simple as 'making a decision' and putting up their hand at a church or evangelical meeting. Sincere though such acts may be, it needs to be realised that such initial acts of faith are just the beginning of God's work of salvation in us. God's salvation in Christ goes much further since it is his intention:

To redeem us from every lawless deed, and to purify for himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds (Titus 2:14) and to be

A chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who has called you out of darkness into His marvellous light (1 Peter 2:9).

So we become, not just 'saved' people but his adopted children, citizens of his kingdom. We also become priests, not as those only who serve in an official capacity in a church, but simply people who serve and worship him. Salvation, then, is not just for our sake but for God and his purpose for us. He achieves this by bringing every believer into a vital spiritual union with his Son. Through Jesus' death on the cross and his resurrection we are raised from spiritual death and receive new life, the life of his Son. We are adopted into his family as his children so that we may share in his inheritance and bring glory to him (Ephesians 1:5-7).

Scripture shows us God's salvation in three tenses: past - we *have* been saved; present - we *are being* saved and future - we

will be saved. More on this in '*Salvation: Past, Present and Future'* p 17.

It is God's will, that believing in him, we grow to know him and he us. This is an intimate spiritual union which will be explored in the pages to come. It is only through our union with Jesus, in his death and life that we experience deliverance from both the penalty and power of sin. The outcome of this will not be *religious* people who just hold to a creed, but a *real* people, who show the life of Jesus through the trials and pressures of this life.

Scripture shows us that self-denial, self-discipline and suffering are all part of the normal Christian life. It teaches us that, while faith is needed to begin and continue in the Christian life, our humble and trusting obedience is also needed. Our relationship to Christ is never passive and it is through faith, growth in wisdom, testing circumstances and the power of his Spirit that we might become complete in him (Colossians 1:28-29).

Jesus said the way to eternal life would not be easy:

Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few (Matthew 7:13, 14 ESV).

Here we have a simple statement of how we begin our life in Christ and what we can expect along the way. Christ is the narrow gate. There is no other way by which we can come to God. Jesus says the way is hard that leads to life, the word 'hard' here meaning to suffer affliction (from the Greek word *thlibo*). As we also read in Acts:

Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God (Acts 14:22).

This affliction will be encountered as part of a spiritual battle against the world, our flesh and the devil which no child of God

will be spared. More on this will be explored in '*The Spiritual Battle: the World, the Flesh and the Devil*' p 80.

Is It Sufficient Just To 'Believe'?

Is it sufficient that once faith in Christ has been expressed we need do nothing more to enter God's eternal kingdom? Do we only need to 'believe' or have faith?

James wrote to correct this idea. He says:

What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but he has no works? Can that faith save him? (James 2:14).

He went on to say even the demons believe and shudder (2:19). So the faith that saves is more than acknowledgement of the truth.

The simple point here is that faith must move from the head to the heart, from the intellect to action. Obedience flows from true faith and disobedience from unbelief or lack of faith (Hebrews 3:18-19). Scripture also gives us numerous warnings which show that through continued wilful neglect we can fail to enter God's kingdom. These warnings are not to discourage us but to inform and prepare us for the journey ahead. God is gracious and in Christ we are given every good thing to equip us to do his will and please him, endure trials and enter his eternal kingdom. It is through these trials we learn to grow. Therefore, we can always have confidence as will be seen later.

Our time on this earth is limited and precious. So let's make every opportunity to live for Christ, grow in him, do his will and in so doing, be prepared to enter God’s kingdom.

In the next chapter we will briefly see how and why God saved the people of Israel from slavery to Pharaoh and brought them out of Egypt. This will help us understand what we are saved from and what we are saved for.

Salvation - Saved From and Saved For

Exodus - God's example of salvation

The people of Israel spent 400 years in Egypt as slaves to the Pharaohs. At the right time God raised up a man, Moses, who he used to deliver his people out of Egypt and lead them into the Promised Land. This account, recorded in the book of Exodus, is an illustration of how God saves us today and brings us into his kingdom. Knowing how and why God saved Israel will help us understand how and why God saves us.

God, before saving Israel from Egypt, made seven promises:

1. I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians.

2. I will deliver you from their bondage.

3. I will also redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great judgements.

4. I will take you for my people.

5. I will be your God; and you shall know that I am the LORD your God, who brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians.

6. I will bring you to the land which I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

7. I will give it to you for a possession; I am the LORD (Exodus 6:6-8).

God’s plan for Israel was three-fold:

1. To save his people from slavery and bondage to Pharaoh and redeem them.

2. That they would become his people and he their God.

3. To bring them to the Promised Land and give it to them as a possession.

So Israel was saved *from* Pharaoh and Egypt and saved *for* a purpose - to be God's people and inherit the Promised Land.

Before God brought Israel out of Egypt, they were instructed to sacrifice a lamb and to put its blood over the doors of their houses. When God saw the blood he passed over the homes of the Israelites and they were not judged as were the Egyptians. The shed blood of the Passover lamb foreshadowed the blood to be shed by the coming Messiah - Jesus, the Lamb of God. They were also told to remove leaven from their houses which foreshadowed our need to forsake sin in response to God's call to repentance.

Then God led Israel out of Egypt, through the Red Sea, and in so doing, saved them from slavery.

Under Moses' leadership God made a covenant with the people of Israel. He gave instructions on how they were to live and consequences for disobedience. This became what we know as the Law of Moses – the old covenant.

God's plan for us under the new covenant is this:

1. To save and redeem us from bondage to sin, Satan (who is the god and ruler of this world) and his authority.
2. To be his people, his sons and daughters and he our God.
3. To bring us into his rest and inherit the promises.

The similarities between Israel's salvation from Egypt and ours today through Jesus are informative. Israel experienced salvation from a flesh and blood adversary but we experience salvation from a spiritual adversary. Yet in both there is a blood sacrifice, deliverance from bondage, becoming God's people and a promised inheritance.

We are saved *from* Satan's authority and slavery to sin:

She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins (Matthew 1:21).

...to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God (Acts 26:18).

He has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son (Colossians 1:13).

We are saved *for* the purpose of becoming God's people, a holy people, who will inherit his kingdom.

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light (1Peter 2:9 ESV).

...that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith in Me (Acts 26:18).

The New Testament also reveals God's greater purpose - not only being God's people but that we would for his glory become a Bride for his Son - the Church.

That He might present to himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless (Ephesians 5:27).

Salvation is God's rescuing us from spiritual bondage, slavery to sin and Satan's authority. He has done this through Christ's death and resurrection and transferred us into his kingdom and authority. Then, having been saved, we begin our life with and for God, as his people and fulfilling his purpose.

Salvation: what God does

God is the author of salvation. In our sin and blindness we don't even know our need of salvation until the Holy Spirit convicts us:

And He, when He comes, will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgement (John 16:8).

And you were dead in your trespasses and sins (Ephesians 2:1).

Our attempts to save ourselves and make ourselves right before God are in vain. God alone provides the way to reconcile us to himself by putting his life into our spirit, so raising it from death. He did this through the death of his Son Jesus, redeeming, forgiving, justifying and reconciling us to himself:

Being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus (Romans 3:24).

In him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace (Ephesians 1:7).

For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life (Romans 5:10).

So we are forgiven of our sins through Jesus' death and blood and reconciled to God. We should note here that sin means more than doing what we know is wrong. It means missing the mark, the goal being God's glory. While there are things we shouldn't do, there are also things we *should* do. In this respect then, whether we have sinned much or little, we all fall short of God's mark and glory (Romans 3:23).

Only as God justifies us and imparts his life in us is this goal achieved. When God justifies us through Christ our record of sin is taken away and we are made right in his sight. It is a gift by his grace which we receive through faith in Christ. God redeems us, purchasing us for a price, the price being the blood of Christ. Therefore we become his possession:

Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are

not your own? For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body (1 Corinthians 6:19, 20).

Salvation is God's act of grace through Christ's death and resurrection. Without Christ we are enslaved to Satan and sin and it is impossible that we free ourselves (2Timothy 2:26 and Romans 7:23-25). But in Christ we are set free from the power of sin.

Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death (Romans 8:1-2).

Salvation: past, present and future

God's salvation is not a just a past occurrence, but is ongoing. Scripture shows us that:

We have been saved: *For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God* (Ephesians 2:8).

This is our deliverance from Satan and sin which happened when we first put our faith in Jesus.

We are being saved: *Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain* (1Corinthians 15:1-2 ESV).

This is the day to day work of God's Spirit in us producing the fruit of the Spirit.

We shall be saved: *For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life* (Romans 5:10).

..who are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time (1 Peter 1:5)

This is in the future when Christ returns and our bodies are transformed to his likeness and we are with him for eternity.

Salvation: Our response

Repentance

To repent simply means to change our mind about our way of life and live God's way.

The Gospel message calls us to repent and believe. Without repentance forgiveness is meaningless and faith is in vain. When Jesus began his ministry his first recorded words were:

The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel (Mark 1:15).

Jesus told those who heard to "*repent and believe in the gospel*" because the kingdom of God was at hand. That was the good news. He was proclaiming the coming of a kingdom ruled by God, supplanting all human rule and in which righteousness ruled according to God's standard, not man's.

We need to repent because of God's future judgement:

Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent, because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising him from the dead (Acts 17:30).

God's kindness and patience towards us should lead us to repent:

Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and tolerance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance? (Romans 2:4).

And through repentance we receive forgiveness of sins:

And that repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem (Luke 24:47).

Repentance is a decision to change our mind about sin in response to God's declaration, followed by a change in practice. It is an act of obedience, not because we necessarily feel remorseful.

An example of what true repentance means

The parable of the Prodigal son (Luke 15:11-31) shows what true repentance means. After coming to his senses the son says:

"*I will get up and go to my father, and will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men.*"

He **acted** - '*I will get up and go*'. He **confessed** his sin - '*I have sinned against heaven and in your sight*'. He **humbled** himself - '*I am no longer worthy to be called your son*'.

Repentance is acknowledging we have sinned against God and also against man.

And as in the Proverbs:

He who conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will find compassion (Proverbs 28:13).

A 'decision' for Christ is only meaningful if it is accompanied by repentance which is specific not just a vague acknowledgement of sin in general. True repentance will be shown in a changed life.

Therefore bear fruit in keeping with repentance (Matthew 3:8).

Growing In Christ

The call to repent and believe is one that needs to continue throughout our life. As Peter reminds us:

The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9).

Repentance will mean not just feeling sorry and deciding to change your ways, but also seeking to restore what we have broken - be it a relationship or a trust. If we have committed a crime it will need to be confessed to the relevant authority. Repentance will always have a cost to us personally.

Finally, let's humble ourselves and repent of our self-righteousness because the good things we have done do not merit salvation.

Faith

Faith is trusting in God, not in ourselves. Abraham is called the father of those who believe because he believed God for what was humanly impossible:

Yet, with respect to the promise of God, he did not waver in unbelief but grew strong in faith, giving glory to God, and being fully assured that what God had promised, He was able also to perform. Therefore it was also credited to him as righteousness. Now not for his sake only was it written that it was credited to him, but for our sake also, to whom it will be credited, as those who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead (Romans 4:20-24).

We need faith to come to God because:

Without faith it is impossible to please him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek him (Hebrews 11:6).

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Faith has always been the way to be right before God, before the Law of Moses, during the law and now apart from the law but under grace. It is through faith our life in Christ begins and is maintained. But our faith must be in Christ, in his righteousness, not in our own:

For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes (Romans 10:4).

A righteousness (which means to be morally right before God) based upon faith in Christ is foundational to the Christian faith. The righteousness of God is without compromise and whether we have committed many or few sins, we have all fallen short of the glory of God. We are without excuse. It is only through the blood of Christ our sins are forgiven, since *without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness* (Hebrews 9:22). Hence righteousness must be based on faith in Christ, as Paul explains:

Even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus (Romans 3:22-24).

Faith itself does not save us but it is through faith that we receive God's grace, as Paul reminds us:

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast (Ephesians 2:8,9).

Like a man in a lifeboat who reaches out to a drowning man and says "*Take hold of my hand and I will save you*." No one would suggest the drowning man had saved himself through his holding on. So it is with faith. Our faith is necessary to receive, but not the means of, our salvation. It is God who saves us, by his mercy and grace.

Biblical faith is more than mental assent to the truth of something. It is not simply believing *that* but believing *in*. It is a complete trust and confidence in the one with who we have put our faith. While it begins as a thought it is not complete until we act on it. Biblical faith cannot continue only as a thought.

Faithful to Jesus alone

Our faith is to be in Christ and in him alone, not in the fact we are a member of a particular church. Many take comfort and assurance in belonging to what they believe is the 'one true church' which secures them for all eternity. If our security lies in any organisation or person other than Christ our faith will be in vain.

When Jesus spoke of believing in him (in the gospels) and the promise of eternal life, the way to salvation was not yet finished. He was pointing to the time after his death on the cross and His resurrection when he had completed all God's will by offering himself as a sacrifice for sin. After the resurrection, the apostles preached that redemption, forgiveness of sins, justification, salvation and sanctification were given to all who had faith in Jesus.

Jesus told us to be faithful to him and the tragic consequences if we are not:

Therefore everyone who confesses Me before men, I will also confess him before My Father who is in heaven. But whoever denies Me before men, I will also deny him before My Father who is in heaven (Matthew 10:32, 33).

In the parable of the talents it is the *faithful* servant who enters into the joy of Christ (Matthew 25:14-23).

Faith needs to continue

Jesus said *"that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life*" (John 3:16). The tense of 'believe' in this verse

is present tense, that is, one of *continuing* belief, not just that of a single act in the past. Hence faith needs to continue, not just begin. This is the case in other passages which give the promise of eternal life, such as John 3:15, 3:36, 5:24, 6:47 and 11:25.

In the parable of the sower Jesus tells us:

Those on the rocky soil are those who, when they hear, receive the word with joy; and these have no firm root; they believe for a while, and in time of temptation fall away (Luke 8:13).

Jesus says there would be those who hear the gospel, believe it and receive it and so, according to his promise, are saved. There is initially life and growth, but when temptation or a time of testing comes they fall away because their faith does not endure. This is why we are urged to continue in faith (Acts 14:22 and Colossians 1:22, 23).

What it means to endure in faith will be explored in more detail in *The Spiritual Battle: the World the Flesh and the Devil* p 79.

Faith will be tested

Our faith will be tested through trials to prove it is real and through endurance we will grow in spiritual maturity.

Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing (James 1:2-4).

Peter also encourages us with these words:

In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, so that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honour at the revelation of Jesus Christ; and though you have not seen him, you love him, and though you

do not see him now, but believe in him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, obtaining as the outcome of your faith the salvation of your souls (1 Peter 1:6-9).

Moses reminded Israel that God would test their faith in him so he might know their heart:

You shall remember all the way which the LORD your God has led you in the wilderness these forty years, that He might humble you, testing you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not (Deuteronomy 8:2).

So we can expect that our faith will be tested through difficult circumstances. We may be tempted in such times to give up on God or seek an ungodly solution to our situation. Like Israel in the wilderness, when faced with difficulty or hardship we may be tempted to accuse God of neglect. We may be tempted, like Israel, to *go back to Egypt.* That is, in our heart, want to return to our old way of life. So if our faith were to be shaken and even if we were to face death, will we remain faithful?

Jesus promises those who are faithful in trial and persecution:

Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life (Revelation 2:10).

To be faithful to Jesus may cost our reputation before men. It may even cost us our life as is now happening to Christians in many parts of the world.

Though God tests our faith through trials he does not test us beyond our ability to endure it as Paul encourages us:

No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it (1 Corinthians 10:13 ESV).

It is through times of trial and temptation God teaches us to be faithful and holy. his love and discipline is for our good, especially in the midst of trial. By standing in his strength at such times we will grow into the likeness of his Son who endured great temptation and suffering.

Faith and obedience

Faith is the foundation upon which obedience to God's revealed will grows. James declared, '*faith without works is dead*' (James 2:26). In other words obedience to God's and Jesus' commands flow from a living faith. If we claim to believe but not obey we deceive ourselves. Paul warned the Corinthians that it is possible to believe or receive the grace of God in vain, that is a faith of no effect (1 Corinthians 15:1-2 and 2 Corinthians 6:1-2).

This does not mean that if, at some time we are disobedient to God's commands, we are faithless. God is patient and gracious for: "*If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness* (1 John 1:9).

Faith in Jesus is shown as we obey him:

He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him (John 3:36).

Why do you call Me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say? (Luke 6:46) and...

My mother and My brothers are these who hear the word of God and do it (Luke 8:21).

And let's not fall into the error of hearing but not obeying:

But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves (James 1:22 ESV).

Therefore knowing God's word - through reading and hearing is necessary to do his will.

By this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep His commandments. The one who says, "I have come to know Him," and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him (1John 2:3-4).

Obedience is not a burden but like David be a delight flowing from a heart of love for God and his word:

I delight to do Your will, O my God; Your Law is within my heart (Psalm 40:8).

"*Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls, for My yoke is easy and My burden is light.*" (Matthew 11:29-30).

In Hebrews 11 we are given many examples of men and women of God who, through their faith in him, accomplished many things. Yet it should be noted that in each case their faith was accompanied by action. It involved trusting and obeying God for that which humanly seemed impossible.

Is this suggesting we are initially saved by God's grace and finally saved by our obedience? No. Our obedience is needed but never earns his grace. Only through our faith in Jesus and by God's grace are we justified and saved. Obedience is the outcome of an enduring faith in Christ and love for God. It is like the drowning man referred to earlier. No one would suggest he had saved himself by his obedience in holding on.

As Jesus said:

So you too, when you do all the things which are commanded you, say, 'We are unworthy slaves; we have done only that which we ought to have done (Luke 17:10).

God's plan of salvation, by his intention, grace and power, is not fulfilled in us without our co-operation. It is God who gives

the rain and sun and causes growth of the wheat but a farmer needs to prepare the soil and sow the seed. In the same way, it is God's life and power which enable us to grow, but this can only happen as we obey him. We prepare for battle, but it is God who gives the victory. Yet we should not expect growth to be smooth and uninterrupted because we face a spiritual battle. See: *The Spiritual Battle: the World the Flesh and the Devil* p 79.

Examples of faith and obedience

1. Israel, in faith, passed through the Red Sea and so escaped bondage to Pharaoh and Egypt. Would they have been saved had they remained on the shores of the Red Sea? No, they had faith, obeyed and so were saved (Hebrews 11:29 and Jude 1:5)

2. A blind man was told by Jesus to go and wash in the pool of Siloam. his obedience by washing in the pool of Siloam was not the cause of his receiving his sight. It was Jesus who healed him not his act of washing. Yet would he have been healed if he hadn't washed in the pool of Siloam? No, for that would have shown he didn't have faith in Jesus. The blind man had faith and obeyed, and so was healed (John 9:1-7).

3. Naaman the leper was told to wash in the Jordan seven times by Elisha. At first he resisted thinking other rivers would surely be better. Yet he obeyed Elisha and God healed him. Would he have been healed had he washed in the Abanah or Pharpar rivers, or had he washed himself only six times in the Jordan? No, yet through his faith followed by obedience, God healed him (2 Kings 5:1-14).

4. Abraham obeyed God in leaving his home country for the land of promise, believing God would fulfil his promise (Genesis 12:1-5). He obeyed, offering up his son Isaac believing God would raise him from the dead (Hebrews 11:17-19).

Obedience to God flows from faith in and love for him. The reality of our faith in and love for God will be shown in our

willingness to obey him, and his commands are not burdensome (1 John 5:3) but rather should be our delight (Psalm 1:2 and 112:1).

Baptism

Baptism should be our first act of faith and obedience after repentance and believing in Jesus. Throughout the book of Acts we see baptism as being the normal response after repentance and faith and receiving the Holy Spirit. Jesus commanded his disciples be baptised:

Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19).

And Peter on the day of Pentecost:

Repent, and each of you be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38).

Baptism is not just a symbolic act of union with Christ but an act of faith in obedience to Jesus' command. Like Israel's act of faith in passing through the Red Sea and becoming separated from their old life in Egypt, so baptism, though a physical act, is a spiritual event through which, in faith, our old self is buried and we receive new life. Paul spoke about baptism as the burial of our old self:

Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptised into Christ Jesus have been baptised into His death? Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life (Romans 6:3-4).

The English word '*baptise*' is actually a transliteration (not translation) of the Greek word '*baptizo*' which means 'to immerse or submerge'

When and how should we be baptised? Because baptism is our response in faith and obedience to the call to repent and believe the gospel of Christ it should be a conscious and willing decision on our part. For this reason infant baptism (or christening) cannot be regarded as valid. As to the manner: it ought to be by immersion (as a true translation of the Greek word indicates) in water and as to when it should happen: as soon as possible after believing. This was certainly the practice in the early church.

The Cross - The End and the Beginning

The death of Christ on the cross is the single most significant event since creation. All before led to the cross and all after is because of the cross. Jesus' victory on the cross ended Satan's dominion over man and death (Hebrews 2:14-15).

Through the cross our debt of sin has been cancelled:

When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross (Colossians 2:13-14).

Through the cross our slavery to sin has ended and we receive new life:

When Jesus was crucified, our old and sinful self was crucified and died with him. It marks the end of our old life and the beginning of the new:

Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall also be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old self was crucified with Him, in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin (Romans 6:4-6).

Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come (2 Corinthians 5:17).

The New Life

God's way with our sinfulness is not by reforming the old life but by crucifying it, putting it to death and creating a new life. Through the resurrection of Christ we receive new life. This new life, being born again, having eternal life, is in fact Christ in us and us in him. This is why Jesus said "*unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God*" (John 3:3).

We may not *feel* as if we have new life and may be very conscious that our old life is still active. We may not *feel* forgiven or saved but we know it to be a reality because God's word says we are. In the same way we may not *feel* our old self is dead, yet we know it to be a reality by faith in God's word. If we believe we have been forgiven in Christ then we must also believe we have died in Christ. Both are true.

Because of Adam we were born sinners but through the Cross we have become dead to sin and born again with the life of God. Though the death of our old self and the presence of new life is a reality in Christ, we will find while in this present body that sinful desires will persist. This is why Paul tells us:

Even so consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its lusts, and do not go on presenting the members of your body to sin as instruments of unrighteousness; but present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God (Romans 6:11-13).

The word translated '*consider*' in this verse in the original Greek conveys the meaning of 'reckon' or 'count'. It speaks of a *reality*, a fact not an ideal. So though experience may cause us to think our old self is not dead, we must count or reckon that it is dead, exercising our faith by acting on it. Satan will try to convince us that it is not dead so we will doubt and disobey God. The problem many of us face with sin is that we still think our old

self is alive and we still think in its old ways. However if we believe, on the basis of God's word, our old self is dead and no longer has power over us then we will have the mind to do what God asks. This is why we are told to be renewed in the spirit of our minds (Ephesians 4:22). Our thinking is what first needs to change.

Paul, in answer to the question "*Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase?*" responds with an emphatic "*May it never be!*" We are no longer to let sin rule in our bodies and we are able to do so because of what Christ has done through his cross. Before the Cross we were slaves to sin but now we have become slaves to Jesus:

Do you not know that when you present yourselves to someone as slaves for obedience, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin resulting in death, or of obedience resulting in righteousness? (Romans 6:16).

Paul, in Romans 7, tells of an inner battle - between our mind which knows and wants to do God's will and the sinful nature. Our old self wants its own way, to resist God's authority and when presented with his commandments results in a desire to do what we shouldn't. We see this with our children. Tell them not to do something and that is the very thing they want to do! The old self is incapable of overcoming sin and doing God's will. Only Christ can set us free - first by crucifying the old self and then creating a new self in the image of him. This is what it means to be born again.

The Two Laws

For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death (Romans 8:2).

While we live in this world we will be subject to one of two laws: the law of sin and death or the law of the Spirit of life in Christ. To illustrate the operation of these two laws we can

compare the operation of the law of gravity and the law of aerodynamics. If we are in an aircraft, the law of aerodynamics overcomes the law of gravity and so we are kept aloft. However, the law of gravity hasn't been eliminated as we can still feel its pull, though in the aircraft. Should we jump from the aircraft the law of gravity will bring us to a certain demise! So it is with us. While we are in Christ, the law of the Spirit overcomes the law of sin and death and so we have life and are able to live for God:

So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh- for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God (Romans 8:12-14).

To live by and be led by the Spirit is not an option but an obligation. What we sow we shall reap:

Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life (Galatians 6:7,8).

Our old self was crucified with Christ and we have received new life - his life. We are united with him, through faith, in both his death and life. The Cross has ended our slavery to sin and his resurrection has bought us new life. Before the Cross we were dead *in* sin. Now we must count ourselves dead *to* sin. After the Cross and Christ's resurrection we have become alive to God and slaves to righteousness. This is why John says those born of God cannot sin, because it is not the nature of the new self to sin (1 John 3:9).

While we are in this body we will always have a battle against sin but through Christ we can overcome. If we do sin it is because we have chosen to do so, not because it is inevitable. Yet if we repent and confess our sins Christ will forgive and cleanse us. So as we continue to believe God, thanking him in the assurance that

our old self has been rendered powerless, the life of Christ in us, the new self will, day by day, become a greater reality in experience (2 Corinthians 4:16).

And finally:

The Cross has made Jew and Gentile one in Christ

For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. (Ephesians 2:14-16 ESV).

Before the cross Gentiles (the nations other than Israel) were excluded from the promises of God but now in Christ we share those promises. There is now no distinction between Jew and Gentile. All who believe in Jesus, whether Jew or Gentile, are one in Christ.

Living As God's People: Part 1

As we saw in the last chapter God has, through Jesus' death and resurrection, saved us from both the penalty and power of sin, given us new life and made us his people. As his people God has:

Blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him (Ephesians 1:3,4).

God has made our life and source of spiritual power in Christ himself. He has placed us *in Christ*:

And raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 2:6).

The significance and greatness of God's power working in us cannot be overestimated:

Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us (Ephesians 3:20).

And as Peter also encourages us, by God's power we can live as he intended:

Seeing that His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence. For by these He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, so that by them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust (2 Peter 1:3,4).

Renewing Our Minds

Therefore we have every encouragement to be able to live as God intends, through his power. Though the power of sin has

been conquered and we have Christ's life within us, we are to put on and live out of the new self. How can we do this? It is our thinking which first needs to change:

And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect (Romans 12:2).

And in Ephesians we read:

That, in reference to your former manner of life, you lay aside the old self, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit, and that you be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and put on the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth (Ephesians 4:22-24).

But this does not happen without a battle:

For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses. We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ (2 Corinthians 10:4,5).

As God's people we grow in Christ, through faith in him, by his power, as we lay aside the old self, renew our mind and put on the new self - Christ (Romans 13:14). But it is in our mind that the battle is fought and won. It is our thoughts that first need to be brought into obedience. Through the Scriptures and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, who dwells in us, we can renew our minds:

For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace (Romans 8:5-6).

Growing In Christ

All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

You may ask: "*But how can I control my thoughts*?" When Jesus was tempted by Satan in the wilderness, he responded to every temptation with God's word: "*It is written*..." (Matthew 4: 1-11). It is not sufficient to just repel a sinful thought. Counteract that thought with God's word (as Jesus did), speaking it out loud if need be. We fill our minds with God's word by reading or listening to the Bible, through teaching, fellowship with other Christians, prayer and spiritual music. Be prepared to take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ in all things, including activities such as entertainment and recreational pursuits which may seem harmless but compete for our affection and mind's attention.

Just as a baby learns to feed, talk and walk so we, when born again, need to feed (on the word of God), talk (the language of the Kingdom) and walk (think and act) in God's ways. It's learning a whole new way of life.

The Fear of God

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction (Proverbs 1:7).

Throughout the Bible we told to '*fear God*' or '*fear the Lord*'. But what does it mean to *fear God* and why do we need to?

First to *fear God* doesn't mean to have a dread-like fear that at any moment God will punish us for some perceived misbehaviour on our part. Rather, as in the Psalms we are told:

Blessed is everyone who fears the Lord, who walks in His ways (Psalm 128:1).

Blessed here means to be content and at peace because they

have a healthy fear of God, a humble and deep respect for his authority, to live his way and obey him.

Just as we live in this world we know that respect for and obedience to our governing authorities is right and necessary for a peaceful and just society. We know that to disobey the laws given by legitimate authority will result in penalty, to our sorrow. Those who have no fear of authority are inevitably people who do wrong.

Therefore, a healthy fear of God is foundational to living as a child of him. The fear of God is said to be the beginning of wisdom and knowledge, pure, enduring forever and by it we avoid evil (Psalm 19:9, Proverbs 16:6).

God told Jeremiah why his people should fear him:

They shall be My people, and I will be their God and I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear Me always, for their own good and for the good of their children after them. I will make an everlasting covenant with them that I will not turn away from them, to do them good; and I will put the fear of Me in their hearts so that they will not turn away from Me (Jeremiah 32:38-40).

Israel was to fear God so they would not turn away him. As people of the new covenant it might seem contradictory that having received God's grace and kindness we should need to fear him. Nor should we replace *fear of* with *reverence* for God. While we should revere God, it is not the same as fear God. A healthy fear of God is a mark of a disciple of Jesus. Jesus told us to fear God:

I say to you, My friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that have no more that they can do. But I will warn you whom to fear: fear the One who, after He has killed, has authority to cast into hell; yes, I tell you, fear Him! (Luke 12:4, 5)

We should note that this warning, and most of the other warnings Jesus made about hell (called Gehenna in the original Greek), a place of darkness and conscious everlasting torment, were made to his disciples - those who had believed in him. We may find it difficult to accept this because we think it is inconsistent with God's love. Yet Jesus, who told us about God's love and salvation, taught us most of what the Bible has to say on hell.

He gave a solemn warning of the seriousness of sin:

If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it from you; it is better for you to enter life crippled or lame, than to have two hands or two feet and be cast into the eternal fire. If your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out and throw it from you. It is better for you to enter life with one eye, than to have two eyes and be cast into the fiery hell (Matthew 18:8, 9).

Though '*cut off*' and '*pluck out*' were not meant to be taken literally (since the source of sin is in our heart, not our body) these words never the less convey to us the seriousness of sin and we must do whatever it takes to forsake it. It is better to lose what we value or take pleasure in here than lose our life for eternity.

As unpleasant the subject of hell is we cannot ignore it, for if we ignore the warnings or think they only apply to unbelievers, we are in danger of becoming complacent about sin.

The Christians in Rome received a solemn warning from Paul not to be arrogant by thinking God would overlook sin in them which he would condemn in others. God's judgement is impartial (Romans 2:1-11). We should take to heart both the severity and kindness of God (Romans 11:20-22).

Many times in the Psalms is the instruction to *fear the Lord* or simply *fear Him.* So if we have a healthy fear of God there is great reassurance of his loving-kindness and compassion (Psalm

103: 11-17). The early churches had a healthy fear of God and were comforted for they were '*going on in the fear of the Lord and the comfort of the Holy Spirit*' (Acts 9:31).

Yet it is love for God that should ultimately motivate us to serve and obey him, not fear, since it is the love of Christ that controls us (2 Corinthians 5:14). As we grow in Christ, through his Spirit within us, love should be our primary motivation as we shall learn later.

The Character of God's People

As God's people what type of people should we be? In a word we should be like Jesus.

The one who says he abides in Him ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked (1John 2:6).

Throughout the Bible we are encouraged, having been saved and received new life, to be loving, humble, forgiving, merciful, joyful, peaceful, patient, kind, righteous, faithful, gentle and self-controlled. Jesus used imagery of the natural world to illustrate what we are to be - salt of the earth, light in the world, branches of a vine which bear fruit, good soil which produces a crop, sheep who follow the shepherd and our body as a temple of the Holy Spirit.

It is God's intention we all show these qualities, the fruit of Christ's Spirit in us. Yet he works in each of us uniquely to accomplish his purpose for his glory. This is true also for different cultures and times.

In the next section some of these qualities will be explored in more detail beginning with Jesus' teaching from what is known as the *Sermon on the Mount* (Matthew 5 to 7).

The Beatitudes

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught his disciples the priority of inner character over outward conduct. It is what we *are* that will determine what we *do*. He began teaching his disciples by giving eight characteristics of citizens of God's kingdom, known as *the Beatitudes* (Matthew 5:1-12). They fly in the face of human nature and run counter to what the world aspires to. They are not characteristics the world sees as keys to success and happiness. The world often portrays God's way as repressive and joyless. Yet Jesus says those who bear these qualities are blessed, fortunate, prepared for his kingdom. Jesus didn't just teach these qualities but came and died to save us so we could live them.

1. **Poverty of spirit**

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven (v 3).

The LORD is near to the broken hearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit (Psalm 34:18).

Poverty of spirit arises when circumstances bring us to the point of seeing no way out and no hope. It could be poverty of means, ill health or a broken relationship which breaks our heart and crushes our spirit. Human nature sees poverty of spirit as something to be avoided, yet it is a condition which enables God to reach us. When someone is destitute in spirit, their only hope, comfort and strength is in God. When we are humble and recognise that we have nothing to offer God except our trust and obedience, when we are broken and even despair of life we become ready vessels for God's Spirit. Such people are potential citizens of the kingdom of God.

Luke's account (6:20) says "*Blessed are you poor...*" and it is true that that those who have least in worldly possessions are those who are more likely to embrace the gospel of Christ.

2. **Sorrow**

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted (v 4).

When we mourn for our failings before God, he can reach us, forgive us and comfort us. Mourning over our sin is more than feeling sorry because we fear punishment. Like the prodigal son of Luke 15, we must grieve because we have sinned against a holy God and are unworthy of him. As we mourn over the death of a loved one so we should mourn, first over our own sinfulness and secondly for the lost - those in spiritual death.

Those who mourn are sensitive to the sorrows of others, weeping with those who weep and grieving over others losses. Jesus wept over Jerusalem and Peter wept after denying Jesus. Paul wept over those who had believed but then walked as enemies of the cross (Philippians 3:18) and mourned for those living a sinful life (2 Corinthians 12:21). God promises that though we experience sorrow in this life there will be a day when he wipes away every tear (Revelation 21:4).

3. **Gentleness** (or meekness)

Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth (v 5).

The gentleness Jesus refers to is not outward conduct but an inner spiritual quality. Such people are not self-assertive, but are aware of their own weakness and dependence on God. Like humility, gentle people do not assert their own will on others, act aggressively or take revenge, but rather give encouragement.

As Paul encourages us:

So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience (Colossians 3:12).

Humility is an essential quality which we also need to have. It complements gentleness. While gentleness is shown in how we

treat others, humility is shown in how we see ourselves - first before God and secondly before others.

Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time (1 Peter 5:6).

But to this one I will look, To him who is humble and contrite of spirit, and who trembles at My word (Isaiah 66:2).

Humility is the opposite of pride. Pride is deeply offensive to God - and the original sin of Satan. Pride seeks to assert its own will over others and before God in the pursuit of self-importance. Pride is never satisfied and will always be an obstacle to growth. Jesus taught that to be great in God's eyes we must humble ourselves:

If anyone wants to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all (Mark 9:35).

Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 18:4).

To be child-like (not childish) is to have a humble attitude, willing to learn, admit our mistakes and change our ways. Such are the qualities of a child of God which is why Jesus showed such love and respect for children (Matthew 18:1-6). A child-like attitude is not just desirable but necessary:

Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it (Mark 10:15).

We are encouraged to maintain a humble attitude:

Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others. Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus (Philippians 2:3-5).

Those of us who teach and exercise authority within the church must do so with humility, as a servant, not enforcing it over others as in the world. Authority is maintained by submission, not force.

Without humility we will want our own way rather than God's and without humility towards our brothers and sisters in Christ we will inevitably find conflict and antagonism.

4. **A hunger and thirst for righteousness**

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied (v 6).

As food and water are the natural desire of our body, so righteousness - being and living right before God - should be the earnest desire of our soul and spirit, a desire motivated by spiritual hunger and thirst, not fear of punishment. God promises that this desire will be satisfied - in Christ.

Jesus taught us that our first priority should be to seek God's kingdom and his righteousness, a priority over and above the desires of life in this world. If we do this God will provide for our natural needs:

But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you (Matthew 6:33).

5. **Mercy**

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy (v 7).

Mercy is showing undeserved kindness to those who sin against us. We are to be merciful because God has shown mercy to us.

But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High; for He Himself is kind to ungrateful and evil men. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful (Luke 6:35, 36).

To others who struggle with sin, show mercy but without compromising truth.

And have mercy on some, who are doubting; save others, snatching them out of the fire; and on some have mercy with fear, hating even the garment polluted by the flesh (Jude 22, 23).

If we show mercy we will receive mercy.

6. **Purity of heart**

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God (v 8).

Jesus emphasised that it was the condition of our heart - where our true moral nature resides - that counted in the eyes of God. He castigated the Pharisees for their inner unrighteousness and hypocrisy though they gave every appearance of being holy and righteous people. As David says:

Who may ascend into the hill of the LORD? and who may stand in His holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who has not lifted up his soul to falsehood and has not sworn deceitfully. He shall receive a blessing from the LORD and righteousness from the God of his salvation (Psalm 24:3-5).

Being pure in heart is to have a heart free of moral impurity. It is not just appearing to do what is right, the intent of our heart must be right also, according to God's standard. How can we have a pure heart? Only through a heart and conscience made clean through the blood of Christ (Hebrews 10:22) and we keep our heart and conscience pure by choosing to live God's way.

7. **Making peace**

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God (v 9).

A peacemaker does not seek conflict but neither is he a pacifist or one who avoids conflict and makes peace at any cost. A peacemaker is not someone who wants to argue but someone who

seeks, as far as it depends on him, to make peace. When someone goads you, don't follow his lead but rather try to calm the situation, without compromising the truth. Don't return evil with evil. A peacemaker does not seek revenge when wronged, but rather works for the other's good.

So then we pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another (Romans 14:19).

Jealousy and selfish ambition lead to conflict and disorder but when love is practised peace is made.

Finally, brethren, rejoice, be made complete, be comforted, be like-minded, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you (2 Corinthians 13:11).

As God has made peace with us so we are to strive to be at peace with one another.

8. **Enduring persecution for Christ's sake**

Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you (v 10,11).

Suffering for righteousness and for Christ's sake is not what anyone would naturally want, yet Jesus says such are blessed. Further it is something we ought to expect:

For to you it has been granted for Christ's sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake (Philippians 1:29).

And:

Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted (2 Timothy 3:12).

Peter also forewarned and encourages us with these words:

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you (1 Peter 4:12-14).

Are we prepared to bear the world's ridicule and hate, the loss in this world of all we hold dear for the sake of Christ and the glory to come? Across this world persecution, suffering and loss are being endured by our brothers and sisters in Christ on a daily basis. They have not only heard about persecution, they are living under it.

Responding to suffering

It is not just enduring suffering but how we respond to suffering that is crucial:

For what credit is there if, when you sin and are harshly treated, you endure it with patience? But if when you do what is right and suffer for it you patiently endure it, this finds favour with God. For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps, who committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in his mouth; and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously (1 Peter 2:20-23).

Therefore, like Jesus, patiently endure suffering and persecution without retaliation and leave judgement to God.

We cannot do these things in our own strength

When Jesus taught these words it must have produced despair in the hearts of his hearers. *How can I live up to this standard*?

Growing In Christ

Many have endeavoured to live as Jesus taught us in the Sermon on the Mount, only to fail miserably. In our own strength it is impossible to consistently live these eight qualities, but the good news is: in Christ we can. As Paul says:

I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me (Galatians 2:20).

And:

My little children, for whom I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you (Galatians 4:19 ESV).

Through the cross the power of our sin nature has been broken and through the resurrection of Christ we receive his life in us. Therefore it is Jesus himself who is the source of our strength to live the way he taught us. But how is Christ's life revealed in us? This is the next subject to be considered.

We Are To Deny Self

If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his soul will lose it, but whoever loses his soul for My sake, he is the one who will save it (Luke 9:23,24).

Through the cross of Christ we have died to sin and received new life but unless we deny ourselves the fruit of Christ's life will not be produced in us. Taking up our cross is not unavoidable trial but the daily choice of God's will over our own. It means renouncing control of our own life and placing it in the hands of Jesus. It means putting off the old self and putting on the new self created by God (Ephesians 4:22-24). There will be times when God will ask us to do something we don't want to do. At such times we cannot trust our own strength, wisdom and ability. These will be obstacles unless we submit them to God.

And He died for all, so that they who live might no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf (2 Corinthians 5:15).

Denying ourselves to follow Christ will mean the end of self-importance, self-righteousness, self-dependence, self-vindication, self-pity and our own wisdom.

Such choices can be difficult. It could mean choosing a life of humble service for the sake of others over a well-paid and highly regarded career. Even Christian ministry can be a hindrance in following Christ if we love our position in the church more than the people of the church. Will we be content just to be a servant whose praise is from God?

Following Jesus will at times be personally painful and may cost our time and resources, health, recreation, sleep and even our families. It is contrary to human nature and will always be inconvenient. Whatever would hinder our following Jesus we must put aside. As the writer to the Hebrews encourages us:

Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross (Hebrews 12:1,2).

A word of caution is needed here. Denying self and following Christ does not mean we can throw off our responsibilities in this world towards those closest to us and pursue a ministry of our choice. Such a choice could in fact be motivated by selfishness not the leading of the Holy Spirit. Serving Christ cannot be an excuse to not love our neighbour – especially our husband or wife and members of our own family.

We Are To Be Led By the Holy Spirit

For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God (Romans 8:14).

Being led by and walking by the Spirit of God is for all who believe in Jesus. It distinguishes those who are God's children from those who are not. As Paul tells us:

But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh (Galatians 5:16).

As Christians we don't just obey a set of rules, but are to be motivated by God's Spirit living in our heart. This is the essential difference between the Old and New Covenants:

Being manifested that you are a letter of Christ, cared for by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts (2 Corinthians 3:3).

How are we '*led by the Spirit*'? Only through salvation in Christ with God's Spirit dwelling in us and with a renewed mind can we be led by the Holy Spirit, discern and know God's will. The Holy Spirit leads us, not forces us to follow which is why learning to listen to his voice is so important. Seven times in the book of Revelation Jesus says *'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches'*. Throughout the book of Acts it was the Holy Spirit who spoke to and guided the church and individuals.

As sons of God we learn to hear the Holy Spirit as we spend time listening, through prayer, reading, meditating and applying God's word - the Bible. Understanding God's word comes through spiritual enlightenment, by the Holy Spirit, not human reasoning alone:

Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely

given us by God. And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual. The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned (2 Corinthians 2:12-14 ESV).

Both the Word (the Bible) and the guidance of the Spirit are needed. What we discern inwardly from the Spirit must be in harmony with what we read in the Bible. If we don't read and know what the Scriptures teach how will we be able to test those inner feelings as to whether they are from God or not? Many have gone astray through inner perceptions believed to be of the Holy Spirit but were not tested. The leading of the Spirit will never contradict what is written in the Bible.

Jesus taught many spiritual principles through parables, because only by the Holy Spirit could they truly be understood (Luke 8:10). He also used examples from life in this world to illustrate what we are to be and what we are to do while in this world. This will be explored next.

We Are To Be Salt and Light in the World

Salt of the Earth

You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has become tasteless, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men (Matthew 5:13).

What did Jesus mean by saying we were to be the *salt of the earth*? Salt was, and is, used primarily as a seasoning. It adds flavour to food. Its presence is distinctly noticed and though small in amount, its influence is great. So it is with us as we live in this world. People should notice that we are distinctly different by our behaviour. We are like the taste of God on Earth. We might be a minority in our community but our influence should be for good.

Are we noticeably different by showing love, joy, peace - the fruit of the Spirit? However, Jesus warned if we become tasteless, that is we are no different in our behaviour and an influence for good to those in the world we are no longer of any use and will be discarded. This is a sobering prospect.

Light in the World

You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden; nor does anyone light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on the lamp stand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven (Matthew 5:14-16).

Jesus is the light of the world and we show his light through acts such as love, kindness, mercy, hospitality and compassion to others but most of all to our brothers and sisters in Christ. We show light through moral purity. But we cannot be light in the world if we live with hypocrisy or retreat to exclusive Christian communities and have little or no interaction with those outside. Light exposes darkness and so it is essential that if we are to be light in the world there be no darkness (sin) in us:

So that you will prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world (Philippians 2:15).

To be salt and light in this world and show the life of Christ within us, we must be consistent and not hypocritical by speaking and behaving differently when we are in the company of those outside the church.

We Are To Bear Fruit

Jesus spoke of us as being trees, branches and soil which produce good fruit.

So every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire (Mt 7:17-19).

I am the true vine, and My Father is the vine dresser. Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit, He prunes it, that it may bear more fruit. You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you, unless you abide in Me.

My Father is glorified by this: that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples (John 15:1-4, 8).

This fruit is the moral character of Christ and comes as we grow in him. A branch of a vine cannot bear fruit unless it is connected to the vine. In the same way it is only through our union with Christ that we bear this fruit. It is not of us. Growth takes time and just as we don't expect certain behaviour of a baby or toddler because of their inability, lack of knowledge and inexperience compared to an older child, so it is with us before God.

Jesus said that those who bear fruit will be pruned so as to bear more fruit. This means that we will experience times of trial in our life but it is through these trials God removes that which hinders our growth and bearing fruit.

This fruit is not knowledge or great spiritual gifts. Knowledge is needed, study is good and spiritual gifts are needed but as Paul says they can be a cause for pride (1Corinthians 8:1). Unless the knowledge and gifts we have bring about a greater humility and produce the fruit of the Spirit, the foremost of which is love, they are in vain (1 Corinthians 13:2).

Growing In Christ

The Parable of the Sower

In the parable of the sower (Luke 8:4-15)Jesus says:

But the seed in the good soil, these are the ones who have heard the word in an honest and good heart, and hold it fast, and bear fruit with perseverance (Luke 8:15).

This parable tells of two other soils which do not bear fruit, though there was a period of time when the seed had germinated and grown. It is a parable about how the state of our heart impacts whether we bear fruit or not. People typified by the rocky soil have a shallow heart. They hear and receive the gospel, rejoice in God's grace and kindness but lack depth. They believe for a time but in a time of hardship or testing fall away. Those typified by the seed among thorns have a divided heart. They hear the gospel but do not bear mature fruit because their love and concern for the things of this world impedes the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives. It is those with an honest, pure and good heart, who keep God's word through the trials of life, who will bear fruit.

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control; against such things there is no law (Galatians 5:22,23).

We should ask ourselves: "Am I growing in each of these - *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control*?" If we haven't grown in love, joy and peace since coming to Christ there is a problem which must be addressed. Is there unrepented sin? Perhaps, as in the parable of the sower, our faith maybe shallow or our heart more consumed with things of this world rather than the kingdom of God? (see also page 105)

In whatever circumstances we find ourselves, even in prison for our faith in Christ, there is no law of man, either civil or in the Church, no power outside ourselves that can prevent us bearing the fruit of the Spirit. God uses times of trial to produce in us godly character - fruit (Romans 5:3-4).

How do we bear this fruit? Only in Jesus. A branch cannot bear fruit separate from the vine and a light globe cannot give light of itself but connected to a power source it can. In the same way, we cannot bear fruit unless we remain spiritually connected to Jesus. He said we are to abide or remain in him, as a branch in the vine. It is his life which gives us true life. It is his life and indwelling spirit which enables us to bear fruit (John 15:5, 6).

How do we abide or remain in Christ and be spiritually connected to him?

Jesus answered and said to him, "If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our abode with him" (John 14:23).

If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love; just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love (John 15:10).

Here we have the amazing promise that God the Father will love us, and with Jesus, dwell with us spiritually if we love him. And we love Jesus through keeping his word, that is doing what he has asked us to do, confessing him, remaining faithful and loving our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Put off the old and put on the new

Bearing fruit will mean putting off old habits and putting on the new. Growing in Christ will be an ongoing, life-long process as we, in faith submit our will to God's.

As Paul instructs us:

Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these the wrath of God is coming. In these you too once walked, when you were living in them.

Growing In Christ

But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.

Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony (Colossians 3:5-14 ESV).

We should note a few things from this passage. First Paul assumes we have repented of our old way to live the new way (*have* put off v9 and *have* put on the new v10). Next he says we *are being* renewed. This is Christ's ongoing work in us. We are told to put to death our old sinful deeds (v8 and 9) and put on the new (v10, 12 and 13).

The fruit of God's Spirit will be revealed in our relationships with others. This is especially true in the home, in our marriages, with our children or with our parents. Husbands - how do you react to a critical wife? Wives - how do you react to a husband who seems indifferent to your needs? In the work-place too: how do we shape up when pressured by a domineering supervisor? Children – do you honour your parents? While we may appear pious to Christian friends, our true nature is inevitably revealed in the eyes of those closest to us. Are we showing the fruit of the Spirit to them?

Living As God's People: Part 2

Saved To Be Holy and Righteous

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age (Titus 2:11, 12).

God wants us to be a holy and righteous people. But this is not working for our salvation, but rather the working out of our salvation and always with God's grace. Being holy and righteous is the result of our new nature in Christ. In a contemporary expression, they are as a result of our new DNA. Because we are saved we *can* be holy through the life of Christ and the power of the Spirit of God who comes to dwell in us.

To be holy is not adhering to church ritual and tradition or what 'spiritual' Christians do. Rather, to be holy means to be separated from sin and to be separated for God's purpose. The Bible tells us we are both *made* holy and *to be* holy because *without holiness no one will see the Lord* (Hebrews 12:14)

Paul never refers to Christ's followers as Christians but as '*saints*' or '*holy ones*' (Romans 1:7). If we think of ourselves as what we are in Christ (holy ones), rather than what we were (a sinner) we will be better prepared in our mind to be holy in practice.

Being holy and righteous is not just a list of do's and don'ts, but rather the fruit of Christ indwelling us as we follow the leading of his Spirit. As a child of God, it is what we were created to do (Ephesians 4:24) for his glory. As we read in the beloved Psalm:

He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake (Psalm 23:3 ESV).

Growing In Christ

There are two aspects of being righteous - the first is that we *are made* right before God by his grace as a gift through faith in Christ, known as *justification* (Acts 26:18, Hebrews 13:12). This is also called *imputed* righteousness - by virtue of what Christ has done *for* us as a one-time act, not to be repeated.

The second is that we are *to be* right in our living through bearing the fruit of righteousness. This is also called *imparted* righteousness which comes by virtue of that which Christ does *in* us is ongoing and requires our obedience. This is why we who have believed in Jesus are called *saints* or *holy ones*, because we are made holy in Christ and set apart for a purpose - *to be* holy.

But like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behaviour; because it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy" (1 Peter 1:15, 16).

As the writer to the Hebrews encourages us:

Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. (Hebrews 12:14 ESV).

But flee from these things, you man of God, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, perseverance and gentleness (1 Timothy 6:11).

While righteousness is to be pursued, it is a fruit which comes through the spirit of Christ in us:

And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve the things that are excellent, in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ; having been filled with the fruit of righteousness which comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God (Philippians 1:9-11).

It is our standing in Christ, by God's grace, through his death and resurrection that we are made both legally and practically

righteous. Therefore, we should always be on guard against pride and any form of self- righteousness.

Holy through God's word

When we apply God's word to our lives we are made holy:

Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her, so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word (Ephesians 5:25,26).

his word must therefore be an ever present part of our life: living by every word that proceeds from God (Matthew 4:4).

When we choose to do what is right we become holy in practice:

For just as you presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness, resulting in further lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness, resulting in sanctification (Romans 6:19). (Note: the words sanctification and holiness have the same meaning – from the Greek word *hagiasmos*).

Controlling our tongue

For, the one who desires life, to love and see good days, must keep his tongue from evil and his lips from speaking deceit. He must turn away from evil and do good; he must seek peace and pursue it. For the eyes of the Lord are toward the righteous, and his ears attend to their prayer, but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil (1 Peter 3:10-12).

James also said much about the need to take control over what we say and how we say it (3:2-10).

Words can build up or tear down. It is easy to criticise and pass judgement on others but how difficult it is to undo words hastily uttered but later regretted? We also need to be on guard against a judgemental attitude, especially towards the lost and those struggling with sin. Such an attitude can become an excuse to

hate in the guise of being righteous. While there is a proper place for correction, it must be done in love and in a spirit of gentleness, looking first to our own walk. Remember we are all sinners saved by the grace of God.

What we say should build up others as Paul says:

Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, so that it will give grace to those who hear (Ephesians 4:29).

Don't be a Pharisee

For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:20).

Jesus makes this surprising statement to his disciples. The Pharisees were the conservative evangelicals of Jesus' day and considered to be models of righteousness. They were diligent students of the Scriptures, they prayed, fasted, travelled long distances to make converts, tithed diligently, strictly kept the Mosaic laws of cleanliness and the Sabbath day. All good and right deeds, yet Jesus delivered some of his strongest criticism to them. He called them hypocrites. Why?

First and foremost the Pharisees were not humble before God. Their faith was in their own righteousness not God's. They were zealous for God and the Scriptures but added their own rules which went beyond what God required. They tithed diligently but focused on outward appearances, not the inner person. They worshipped God, but not in spirit. They praised God with their mouths but not with their hearts. They were fastidious in cleanliness but neglected justice, mercy and faithfulness. Their deeds were done to be seen so as to earn the praises of men. They loved money and thought that giving to God negated their need to honour their parents and give to the poor. They sought to impose

burdens on others in the name of righteousness but were unwilling to help and be compassionate (Matthew 23:1-33).

The longer we have been Christians, the greater the risk we may become Christian Pharisees. We can all fall into the same error as the Pharisees if we place greater emphasis on outward form rather than the inner person and by trying to earn God's approval by what we do.

Do we serve to seek acceptance, affirmation and praise from men rather than God? In church do we praise and pray enthusiastically but not in our private times? Are we one person at home with our family but someone else when in church or with other Christians? Beware of hypocrisy here. In our zeal to be righteous and defend God are we known more for what we are against than what we are for? Are we known first by the fruit of the Spirit: our love, joy and peace?

Another error, like the Pharisees, is to build upon man-made traditions; whether they are the way we 'do church' or a theological tradition rather than the word of God and the leading of the Holy Spirit. This is not to say traditions are necessarily wrong but we must always test them against God's word as revealed in the Bible. Do our traditions have a clear basis in the truths of Scripture? When long held church traditions become standards that must adhered to, we have made the error of the Pharisees. Be led first and foremost by the Truth, not tradition.

Worship God in Spirit

True worship is not a ritual done in a certain place at a certain time but is *in spirit and in truth* (John 4:24). That is, it comes from our heart and is expressed in our living for God as Paul encourages us:

To present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship (Romans 12:1).

Worship of God is not just 'going to Church' but the giving of ourselves to his purpose for us, be it humble or great in our eyes. This will include service to our brothers and sisters in Christ who are poor, needy and afflicted. If we neglect them, our 'righteousness' is in vain and God is not pleased (Isaiah 58:1-12).

So let's be motivated from the heart, guided by the Scriptures, led by the Holy Spirit, out of love, compassion, humility and mercy. We must act, not begrudgingly nor out of a desire to maintain a man-made tradition, exercise power over others or receive praise and recognition. Most importantly, it is God we must first please, not man.

Guard our thoughts not just actions

If your eye causes you to stumble, throw it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye, than, having two eyes, to be cast into hell (Mark 9:47).

Of course Jesus did not mean to literally remove an eye since it is not the eye itself that sins but the thoughts coming from our heart and sinful thoughts from what we see. The seriousness of this warning is plain. Therefore we must do whatever it takes to not sin or risk going to hell. This warning bears particular significance today as technology can bring sinful media into our homes through a button on our remote, the click of a mouse or a touch screen. Pornography has become a great evil (particularly through the Internet) which even Christians have succumbed to.

We must therefore guard our thoughts not just our actions.

Be prepared at all times

In the parable of the ten virgins (Matthew 25) Jesus illustrated two types of disciples, both of whom were looking for his coming. Yet five were said to be foolish, because they did not take oil for their lamps and were not prepared when he came. The oil, which supplied the flame which gave light, represents the light of good deeds (Matthew 5:14-16) or the light of Christ

within us (Ephesians 5:8, 9). The oil represents that which is necessary to have, maintain and so be prepared. The foolish virgins neglected to do what they should have done and so were unprepared. The end result is they were shut out.

Other scriptures tell us to always be prepared, holy and blameless, ready for Jesus' return (1 Thessalonians 3:13, 5:23; 2 Peter 3:11-14).

Let's be diligent in practising moral excellence, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness and love so as to make certain of Jesus' calling and choosing.

For as long as you practice these things, you will never stumble; for in this way the entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ will be abundantly supplied to you (2 Peter 1:10,11).

Be on guard against establishing our own standards of righteousness rather than God's. Unconsciously we may do this when we compare ourselves to others rather than that which has been revealed in Scripture. While we live in this world there can be a temptation to think that if we just maintain a standard of morality higher than the world or even our fellow Christians we are alright. The error of this is, of course, that the world's standard and other people become our reference for morality, not God's word.

Be compassionate but uncompromising

In standing up for God's standard we may be accused of being behind the times and a bigot. While this can be expected from those outside it can, sadly, happen within the church. While we should be uncompromising in standing for righteousness, it must be done with gentleness and respect (1 Peter 3:15).

Jesus taught much on how we should relate to and treat other people - especially our brothers and sisters in Christ. We will face situations where we encounter misunderstanding, indifference,

rejection and outright hostility. But we must respond, not in the same way, but with humility, love and forgiveness. Will we be like those who have hurt us or be like Jesus?

We must be careful not to compromise God's standard out of a sense of compassion for others. This has become apparent with the greater acceptance of divorce and remarriage. Jesus did give one exception (see: 'christiansanddivorce.com' for more about this exception) but the fact is most divorces are not for this reason. There is also a greater acceptance of homosexuality within many churches. The human need to love and be loved is understandable, but not at the cost of God's standard of righteousness. Scripture clearly teaches us that a sexual relationship can only exist within marriage - between a man and a woman for life. Therefore what we feel should not determine what we do. Those who are in such situations need truthful, wise and loving counsel, not condemnation.

To be faithful to and follow Christ in this world will require denying self. This will be at times difficult, but not impossible. Most, if not all, people will experience inappropriate opposite or same-sex attraction, or other sexual temptation at some time in their life. A husband may experience romantic and sexual attraction to another woman and similarly, a wife for another man. A man might experience desires and sexual attraction towards children. Yet to act upon such temptations would be sin.

Sin against children is one which Jesus solemnly warned:

But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better for him to have a heavy millstone hung around his neck, and to be drowned in the depth of the sea (Matthew 18:6).

Therefore the fear of God is needed. Jesus said whatever we value in this life which causes us to sin must be parted with lest we end up in hell (Matthew 18:9).

Growing In Christ

Jesus' life is both our example and our true life. Jesus never married or had an intimate relationship with a woman, yet he was the most complete and fulfilled person to have lived in this world. The world tells us that we must be either a sexually active heterosexual or a sexually active homosexual to be complete. This is a lie. For a Christian true completeness is found in Christ. Our sexuality does not define our being. So whether we have opposite or same sex temptations, we are told to resist them. The good news is by God's grace we can (1 Corinthians 10:13). To give up what cannot last to gain what will last forever, and be far better, is no great sacrifice.

Human love lasts for a moment but God's for eternity. That is our choice.

Honour marriage

Marriage is probably one of the greatest opportunities for blessing while at the same time being one of the greatest testing grounds of the Christian faith. It has been said that if you want to best serve Jesus, stay unmarried (as Jesus and Paul encouraged us), but if you want to be like Jesus then marriage is a great tutor. Why? In marriage, every aspect of Christian nature is tested: faithfulness, forgiveness, humility, gentleness, self-control, self-denial, patience, endurance and need I say love - which encompasses all these.

Divorce, to some, may seem the only way out of a difficult or unhappy marriage. Marriage counsellors often observe it is not the big issues which cause couples to part but the little things, which, if not dealt with and forgiven, breed bitterness. Being faithful to our husband or wife is not conditional on our having happiness and harmony. God wants us first to be faithful and holy. Could our problem be that we expect marriage to provide those deepest needs which only God can provide?

In 2000 I became, unwillingly, divorced. As a Christian there were many things I might have been prepared for but divorce was

not one of them. Believing that the Scriptures taught marriage was for life, I was devastated. Yet through this time of great trial God's grace and love sustained me. You can read about it here (christiansanddivorce.com). If you are separated or divorced (but not remarried) I would strongly encourage you to reconcile or if unable to, remain unmarried. God's grace will be sufficient. That I can say from experience.

Caring for our body – the temple of the Holy Spirit

Our body is to be cared for since it is the temple of the Holy Spirit. Paul tells us:

Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? (1 Corinthians 6:19).

We are to present our bodies *as a living and holy sacrifice to God* (Romans 12:1). We know we are not to give our body to sexual immorality or abuse it with drugs but we can also abuse it with food or drink if we consume more than we should. So often the foods we most desire are the ones we know are unhealthy if taken in excess.

In Western society the sheer availability of food and alcohol makes this a particular challenge for many. For those who struggle in this area the good news is with self-discipline, through God's grace and power and with the help of loving brothers or sisters, it can be overcome.

Forgiving those who sin against us

Forgiving others is one of the basic characteristics of those who follow Christ.

In the prayer Jesus taught us is a request for forgiveness but it assumes we have *already* forgiven those who have sinned against us, for if we do not forgive, neither will we be forgiven.

And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors (Matthew 6:12).

For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions (Matthew 6:14, 15).

In the parable of the unforgiving servant, (Matthew 18:21-35) Jesus told of a servant who owed an enormous debt, so great he could not repay it. He was forgiven the debt by his master but he went out and showed no mercy to a fellow servant who owed him a pittance in comparison. The master then called the servant back, threw him into prison and reimposed the original debt. Jesus then concludes this parable with a warning of the consequences of not forgiving others:

My heavenly Father will also do the same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart (Matthew 18:35).

So we must forgive those who sin against us because we have been forgiven our debt of sin, impossible for us to pay, by the blood of Jesus. Forgiveness is not an option.

Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you (Ephesians 4:32).

We all stumble in many ways (James 3:2) and so, despite what someone else may do to us, we must be prepared to forgive. This does not mean we condone their sin or that they will not have to bear the consequences of their sin - particularly if it is a criminal offence. For example, a perpetrator of physical or sexual abuse cannot expect to be forgiven just because he has said "I'm sorry". First there has to be true repentance on his part, not just feeling sorry. There needs to be a genuine change of mind evidenced by confession – “I was wrong”, accepting his responsibility for his actions (not making excuses). He has sinned, not only against another, but against God (whom he needs to fear) and needs to

make concrete steps to change his behaviour. Even then forgiveness cannot be expected - it can only be freely given. If we don't show mercy when we should and can, then neither can we expect to receive mercy. As James says:

For judgement will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgement (James 2:13).

Yet the greatest motivation to forgive is love.

Love - the Greatest Commandment

Jesus said the two greatest commandments were:

'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets (Matthew 22:37-40).

Of all the qualities that God's people exhibit, love should be the foremost. In fact love encompasses them all, which is why love is commanded or exampled more than any other quality.

First our love for Christ must take priority over everyone and everything else and we show this by obeying him:

He who has My commandments and keeps them is the one who loves Me; and he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and will disclose Myself to him (John 14:21).

For this is the love of God: that we keep His commandments; and His commandments are not burdensome (1 John 5:3).

Jesus promises those who love him:

Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him (James 1:12).

Jesus showed and taught us *agape* (one of three Greek words translated 'love' in English) is not the love of *feeling* but of *doing*, showed by valuing and caring for the one loved, even at personal cost. God demonstrated his love for us in the sacrifice of his Son:

But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8).

Knowing how great God's love is should motivate us to love in the same way:

We love, because He first loved us (1 John 4:19).

Agape love – the love of God

Agape (the Greek word translated as 'love' in the New Testament) is the God type of love as distinct from that seen and practised in the world. The world's type of love is typically conditional: if you love me then I'll love you. The God type of love, *agape* is not conditional. It does what is right to others in his eyes. It is a sacrificial love which does good without expecting good in return - even for those who hate and mistreat us:

If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them (Luke 6:32).

But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High; for He Himself is kind to ungrateful and evil men (Luke 6:35).

Loving those who love you is natural. Loving your enemies is supernatural but it is the love Jesus expects of his followers.

Paul reveals the nature of *agape* love. It is patient, kind, humble, pure, forgiving, bearing, hoping, believing, enduring all things and never ends (1 Corinthians 13:4-8).

It is natural to want love from others, but the onus is always on us to love. Love cannot be earned, it can only be given. If we only

love those who love us we are no different to the unsaved. This is especially true when we have unmet needs and don't feel loving. Agape, the God type of love, is what we do, not what we feel.

Love seeks the other's best interests and good. It may not necessarily be what is nice or pleasant, but what is needed. Speaking the truth in love to another may cause offence and pain, even though it is intended for good. Nevertheless, we must not fear speaking the truth, but it must always be done in a spirit of gentleness (Galatians 6:1).

Great faith and knowledge are of no account in God's eyes if we do not love:

If I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing (1 Corinthians 13:2).

Knowledge without love will lead us to inflate our own self-importance instead of humble service to others.

Love for our brothers and sisters in Christ

Love for our brothers and sisters in Christ shows the world that we are his disciples and that we have been saved and born again:

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another (John 13:34, 35).

Since you have in obedience to the truth purified your souls for a sincere love of the brethren, fervently love one another from the heart, for you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, through the living and enduring word of God (1 Peter 1:22-23).

12 times in the New Testament we are told to '*love one another*', 9 of those by the apostle John.

For this reason we cannot be lone Christians without meaningful relationships with other Christians. We can't claim to love our brothers and sisters in Christ if we don't want to spend time in fellowship with them. This must mean more than just going to church on a Sunday. We should test our hearts here: who do we prefer to keep company with - other Christians or non-Christians?

It also means this love must extend to *all* Christians – not just those who are members of our church or denomination.

There may be times when we don't *feel* like loving our brother in Christ, but we must, out of love for Christ who gave his life that we might live. Paul encourages the Galatians with these words:

Let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we will reap if we do not grow weary. So then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith (Galatians 6:9-10).

One of the most beneficial ways we can love one another is to pray for one another according to God's will.

Nor can we profess to love God while at the same time hating a brother or sister in the faith. It is hypocrisy:

If someone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen (1 John 4:20).

Hate is not just an intense negative feeling towards someone. It can be a passive hate in our heart, because of some perceived or real offence. Even though this hate may not expressed in action or words we might look for an excuse not to love (which is not hard to do).

Love for those who are suffering

Love for our brothers and sisters who are suffering whether through a physical need, disability and sickness or under persecution is of particular importance.

Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me (Matthew 25:40).

Remember the prisoners, as though in prison with them, and those who are ill-treated, since you yourselves also are in the body (Hebrews 13:3).

What we do or don't do for them is the same as we do or don't do to Jesus (Matthew 25:35-45).

Though we may not be able to physically visit those under persecution, we can support them practically, and most importantly, pray for them.

Love in the home

As mentioned earlier, it is in our own family relationships that love is first practised and tested. God's purpose for the family is not just for the procreation of the human race, but to be a place where his love is exemplified through husband and wife, parent and child. Every new-born baby is totally helpless and dependent on the loving care of his parents - a picture of our relationship to our heavenly Father. A home where love is nurtured between husband and wife, parents and children is a taste of heaven on earth.

Divorce, for this reason, should not be considered by those who follow Christ. Separation may be warranted where there is serious abuse, but not a legal divorce. Even in cases of adultery or desertion divorce is not justified (see: christiansanddivorce.com). They are not unforgivable sins. Love does not count a wrong suffered and endures all things. We must always be prepared to forgive and reconcile.

The love and relationship between a husband and wife is to exemplify the love and relationship between Christ and his Church. A husband loves his wife by caring for her and a wife loves her husband by submitting to him (Ephesians 5). Of course

love will also be expressed in other ways. I am aware that the terms '*head*' and '*submit*' in this passage are contentious to many. This, I suggest, is because such terms are coloured by the world's concept: head = boss/superior and submit = slave/inferior. Yet this is not the case in God's kingdom, for Jesus said "*This is not the way among you*" (Mark 10:42-45). The one who leads is not by definition superior, or the one who submits inferior (such ideas are from the world).

The roles of head/leadership and submission are guided by '*agape*' love - love which does not seek its own but the well-being of the other. Love and submission are willingly given, not demanded. It is how we serve one another (Galatians 5:13). Too often our understanding of what is love is shaped by how love is portrayed by the world and in particular the media. Love, according to the world, has to be something we *feel*, yet the love that Jesus taught is expressed by what we *do*.

There is much confusion and error regarding the relative roles of husband and wife in Christian marriage and the role of women within the Church. The distinct Biblical roles of men and women, in the home and in the Church are often portrayed as sexist, because they are seen to portray women as inferior to men. This of course is untrue but it is of great concern that such wrong ideas are infiltrating and being adopted by many churches. For more on this crucial subject see *Further Reading* p 139.

Parenthood teaches love

Those of us who are parents learn to love our children by not only providing for their physical needs, but through patiently enduring sleepless nights, daily routines, playing, reading to and comforting them. Parenthood teaches us love, humility, patience (as our Father in heaven is patient with us), self-denial and endurance. As one mother said: "*I prayed for patience and God gave me children*". Training and disciplining them (and discipline here does not mean a brutish display of force) is also how we love them. Discipline teaches a child to fear and respect delegated

authority, preparing them to know the fear of God. If we neglect to diligently discipline our children we in fact show hate towards them. Hate, biblically, is not necessarily a feeling of animosity but can be indifference to or denial of another's need (see Proverbs 13:24). In the home, are we seen as loving people by the other members?

Love is first revealed through those closest to us.

We Are the Body of Christ, a Holy Temple

When God saved us in Christ he made us members of the spiritual body of Christ - the Church.

It might help at this point to understand exactly what we mean by 'the church' for it can convey different ideas to different people. The Greek word, translated as '*church*' in most English bibles, is '*ekklesia*' which literally means '*called out ones*'. A more meaningful translation would be '*congregation*'. It is more than simply a gathering of people (and never refers to a building). It refers to a people, called by Jesus, out from the world, together as a community for a purpose: to be God's holy people who do his will on earth.

Christ is the head and we are the body - the church. It is essential we recognise that there is no earthly 'head' to which we are accountable and has authority over us. Therefore, any 'church' on earth which claims to be the one true church to which we owe our allegiance, is in reality supplanting Christ himself. Beware!

As members of Christ's body we no longer live for ourselves, but for him and for the benefit of others. This is why we cannot choose to be independent Christians without a vital relationship with other believers. We can't claim to love Jesus if we don't want to be with other Christians who are his body. We need others and others need us to grow in Christ. Our love and submission to one another is grown and tested through our relationships within the Church. As Paul encourages us:

Growing In Christ

But speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ, from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love (Ephesians 4:15,16).

So God's purpose for us is to be a functioning member of the body of Christ - the Church - and to be built into a holy temple of God in the Spirit (Ephesians 2:20-22). We each form a unique and important part of God's house, the body of Christ (1 Peter 2:5). With Christ as our Head, we build upon others and others on us. Without our active participation the body suffers loss and so do we (1 Corinthians 12:12-26).

As members of the church we have two principal roles - 1. to other members of the body and 2. as a witness (in word and deed) to the world, bringing the knowledge of God and his salvation. As to the first Jesus said:

By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another (John 13:35).

Without such love our witness to the world lacks substance or worse. As to the second Jesus said:

Peace be with you; as the Father has sent Me, I also send you (John 20:21).

As Jesus' hands and feet, it is our role to bring the knowledge of God's salvation in Christ to a world in spiritual darkness. Yet unless we live as a holy people, above reproach, our witness will be in vain. So often the name of God and Christ is blasphemed in the world because of the sin and hypocrisy of those who claim to be Christians.

Therefore, pursue holiness, respect each other’s gifts and abilities and maintain a humble attitude. We each have a vital role in the body, whether it is what we would consider a humble role

or a more visible one. The bond of love is crucial in the growth of the body of Christ. There inevitably will be tensions – different opinions and priorities – which will bring division and damage our witness unless love is fostered in a mature way. This does not mean we pursue unity at any cost. We must never, in the name of unity, neglect or avoid speaking aspects of God's word which are deemed hard, controversial or divisive. The truth should be spoken without compromise, but always in love.

Peace and Joy

Throughout the Scriptures we are told to be a people of joy and who know the peace of God. This peace and joy is not dependent on outward circumstances but is ours through the Holy Spirit who dwells in us and because of the hope that is before us.

Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you will abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit (Romans 15:13).

When we have a great need or face adverse circumstances we can still know the peace of God:

Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God and the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus (Philippians 4:6-7).

And in times of persecution:

But to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation (1 Peter 4:13).

Despite what may happen in this world, Jesus promises we can have peace:

These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world (John 16:33).

Paul encourages us to rejoice always:

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice! (Philippians 4:4)

And we can express this joy through song:

Sing for joy in the LORD, O you righteous ones; Praise is becoming to the upright (Psalms 33:1).

This does not mean we won't ever feel depressed or burdened. Paul in his second letter to the church in Corinth said in a time of great affliction that they '*were burdened excessively, beyond our strength, so that we despaired even of life*'. But ten times in this passage (2 Corinthians 1:3-10) Paul says they are *comforted* by God and so we can too.

Therefore with such encouragement we can know peace and joy in this world as we believe the promises of God and put our hope in Christ.

The Spiritual Battle: the World the Flesh and the Devil

As we live for God, we will find ourselves in a battle against three adversaries - the world, which hates us and seeks our allegiance (1 John 3:13 and 2:15-17), our flesh (sinful nature), which opposes the leading of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:17) and Satan, who, through deception, tries to deviate us from the right path.

The Battle With the World

It may be difficult to see the world (Greek: *kosmos*) as an enemy. It is what we are most familiar with. We were born into it and because we experience it every day it does not seem a threat to our spiritual journey. For many this world can be the source of happiness, comfort and purpose without any acknowledgement of God. It can give us the impression that all is well, but the Bible reveals the world as we know it is temporary. The physical world we see is a spiritual system which seeks our affection and saps away our love for God:

Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world. The world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God lives forever (1 John 2:15-17).

Behind the world we see is a spiritual order overseen by Satan who is called the *ruler of this world* and the *god of this age* (John 12:31 and 2 Corinthians 4:4). The institutions of the world: governments, education, science, the arts, the media, etc. are not morally neutral but are a part of this world system overseen by Satan and used to his end. They are, for the most part, operated by unregenerate men and women with darkened understanding,

independently of God. We are therefore in occupied territory and need God's protection, strength and wisdom. Yet despite this reality, Jesus has overcome Satan, God is ultimately in control and will bring *all things* (Ephesians 1:9-10) under the authority of Jesus. We must never lose sight of this fact.

Jesus said the world will hate us:

If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, because of this the world hates you (John 15:19).

Increasingly we see today greater hostility towards Christians, whether it be from a hostile followers of a religion such as Islam, atheistic humanism or even secular governments in the name of political correctness. Our allegiance to the kingdom of God and his ways will come under greater testing as time of the end grows closer.

This is why we are said to be in the world but not of it. (John 17:14). Yet we are to separate ourselves from the world, not by isolating ourselves from it, but by *overcoming* it. We should not make the mistake of separating ourselves physically from the world through monastic living or isolated communities as some have done. Our separation is done *spiritually* not physically. We achieve this through making deliberate choices to live God's way in a world which increasingly opposes his way. Let's set our minds on the things above not on the things on earth (Colossians 3:2). And we are able to do this through faith and Christ's death on the cross:

But may it never be that I would boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world (Galatians 6:14).

For whatever is born of God overcomes the world and this is the victory that has overcome the world - our faith (1 John 5:4).

As part of our overcoming, how we think and what we think needs to change. So much of what we think is wise is in fact the wisdom of this world. This is why we are urged to *renew our minds*:

And do not be conformed to this world (age), but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect (Romans 12:2).

Paul states God's wisdom is not like that of this age (world) and only understood and appreciated by those born of God:

Yet we do speak wisdom among those who are mature; a wisdom, however, not of this age nor of the rulers of this age who are passing away (1Corinthians 2:6).

This is why we can expect misunderstanding and opposition.

How does the world exert its influence on us?

1. Idolatry

Idolatry is something we don't normally acknowledge in western countries but an idol can be anything or anyone we devote ourselves to or love more than God. Love for this world amounts to unfaithfulness, as James warns us:

You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God (James 4:4).

So much thought, time and money are spent on acquiring all manner of material things which bring us pleasure and comfort such as houses, cars, clothing, entertainment (music, TV, movies and the many other forms of electronic technology) and even food. Through electronic media such as TV, movies and the Internet the world comes to us. Sport is another idol of the world. Many sport teams and individuals gain fanatical following on par with religious devotion.

Though not necessarily sinful in themselves they exert a powerful influence on our minds and our thinking. We can use them, even enjoy them, but they must never be allowed to take hold of us. They may bring us comfort and pleasure but at best they are temporary and one day will all be gone. The simple test here is: what do I love and think about most?

Jesus told us of the danger of how the love for possessions and riches can quench our love for God and his kingdom. This is particularly brought out in the account of Jesus' encounter with the rich young man in Luke 18. Here a young man, who when faced with a choice of following Jesus or keeping his riches, chose the latter. So we should ask ourselves: What am I living for – this world or the kingdom of God?

People such as movie stars, political leaders, sports heroes, singers, musicians and even Christian leaders and musical artists can become idols, snares, once they preoccupy our thoughts, desires and love.

Let's be content with what we have, being generous in our giving and have self-control. Through faith in Jesus we can resist and overcome the pull of this world. Rely on the wisdom that is from God, not that of the world. Every day we are bombarded through the media to buy the latest new thing, without which, we are told, our lives are deficient. Yet all these things never bring lasting joy or peace. People pursue them, but the pleasure they bring is so fleeting. This is why Jesus said we are to seek treasure in heaven, not on earth (Luke 12:33-34).

Above all, when our delight and love is in God and his kingdom, then the things of this world will have no hold on us.

2. Money

Money is a necessary means by which we live in this world but we are warned against *the love* of money:

Make sure that your character is free from the love of money, being content with what you have; for He Himself has said, "I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you," (Hebrews 13:5).

Jesus castigated the Pharisees because they were '*lovers of money*' (Luke 16:13-15). They prided themselves because they did not worship idols but had made money their god. He warned of the danger that riches brought (Matthew 19:23-24).

It is not a sin to have wealth and money but make sure they do not have us. Be generous and always put our hope in God. As Paul instructs Timothy:

Instruct those who are rich in this present world not to be conceited or to fix their hope on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly supplies us with all things to enjoy. Instruct them to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is life indeed (1Timothy 6:17-19).

Jesus said if we seek first God's kingdom and his righteousness our needs will be provided (Matthew 6:33). Can we be content with what God has provided, with just food and covering? (1Timothy 6:6-8) When we give to other's needs, generously from the heart, we experience two things: joy and a greater detachment from the things of this world.

The way to overcome the world is not necessarily through adopting an austere lifestyle but through having our love, joy, peace and hope, not in the things of this world, but in Jesus and the promises to come. Let's set our minds on the things above not on the things that are on earth (Colossians 3:2) and see ourselves as pilgrims, strangers, temporary residents in a world which is not our home. Often we will feel pulled in two directions - between the things of this world and the kingdom of God. Overcome love for the world with love for God's kingdom.

Take encouragement from the 'cloud of witnesses' in Hebrews 11 who:

All these died in faith, without receiving the promises, but having seen them and having welcomed them from a distance, and having confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth (Hebrews 11:13).

3. Worldly Attitudes and Thinking

The world also exerts its influence on us by trying to shape our thinking and attitudes. For example, the relationship between men and women (by distorting God created roles), children and the elderly (regarding them as a burden) and servanthood (e.g. it is better to be served than *to* serve). Such attitudes are common in the world but should never be in a follower of Christ. *The pride of life* shows itself through the desire to be popular, to seek the praise of other men and to have power and control. Such things will sap our love for God and for his kingdom.

The key to overcoming the world, again, is in Christ; for he *has* overcome the world (John 16:33). As we remain in him, in faith loving what he loves and doing what he commands, we too will overcome the world.

Finally, I want to emphasise again that our separation from the world is spiritual, not physical. Jesus told us we are light in the world and we are not to hide but show that light through moral purity and good deeds, so bringing glory to God (Philippians 2:15 and Matthew 5:14-16). We are a light to the nations, bringing the knowledge of God's salvation (Acts 13:47). Therefore, let's be both seen and heard. This will mean active and sacrificial involvement in the world, not reclusive separation, just as God himself *so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son* (the world here meaning mankind).

The Battle With the Flesh

'The flesh' (Greek: *sarx*), while sometimes referring to the soft parts of our body (as distinguished from bone), in New Testament usage mostly refers to our *sinful nature.* It is said to be weak, prone to temptation, corruption, the source of sinful passions, opposed to the leading of the Holy Spirit and what we inherited from Adam. While in this body we will have to contend with the desires of the flesh but the good news is that, in Christ, the flesh no longer has power over us and so we are able to resist its desires (see *The Cross - the End and the Beginning*).

The battle against the flesh is won through our being united with Christ in his death and resurrection:

Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires (Galatians 5:24).

Our old self (or man) has been crucified with Christ, the body of sin made powerless (Romans 6:6) and our flesh removed (literally 'circumcised') in Christ when we were baptised into him and his death:

and in Him you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead (Colossians 2:11-12).

And through his resurrection we were forgiven our sins and raised to life:

When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross (Colossians 2:13-14).

Because in Christ we have died, been buried, raised up and received his life, sin no longer has power over us and we are no longer its slave. We may not *feel* as if sin has no power but God's word says that we are to *count ourselves dead to sin* (Romans 6:6-13). Therefore, despite how we feel, we are able by God's power to resist the desires of the flesh through faith in him. While our flesh has been crucified and its power destroyed, its old ways and habits can still remain. These old habits need to change and we do this through setting our thoughts on things of the Spirit and renewing our minds (Romans 8:5 and 12:2). We do this through the word of God.

Our body can be used either to serve God or sin (Romans 6:13). The body itself is not sinful but responds to desires and thoughts from our mind and sinful nature. Though we have been '*born again*' and have a '*new self*' (literally: '*man*'), a new creature created in the image of God (Ephesians 4:24 Colossians 3:10), we are urged to put off or lay aside, put to death, make no provision for and to cleanse ourselves from the flesh and its deeds. Because of our inherited habits of thinking, this will not be easy, and at times difficult. It will require self discipline, self denial and especially, taking control of our thoughts. As Paul urges us:

Put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness (Ephesians 4:22-24 ESV).

It is our new self in Christ which is now our true and living identity maintained through faith in him. While in this body we will experience an ongoing struggle between the flesh and the new self in Christ, victory is assured through what Christ has already done for us at the cross. Remember this: the old self is *crucified, dead and buried* but the new self is *alive*, created after the image of God and *being renewed day by day*. This means we can always have great confidence and hope. On the day of Christ,

our corruptible body of flesh will be transformed into one which can never be corrupted. Then our battle with the flesh will have ended.

Satan

Satan is the unseen spiritual adversary of every child of God. He is said to be the ruler of this world and the god of this age, the devil, the deceiver, the tempter, the father of lies and accuser of the brethren.

At one time he was one of the chief angels of God (known then as Lucifer) but fell through pride. Since the beginning he has continually sought to thwart God's purpose. With 6000 years of experience with mankind we should not think we can defeat him in our own strength or wisdom. We are told to resist him (1Peter 5:8-9) in the knowledge we are no longer in bondage to him through the salvation that is in Christ.

While we have been delivered from Satan's authority, he can deceive through his lies (2 Corinthians 11:3) and tempt us (1 Thessalonians 3:5). Satan's lies can be presented in the guise of an angel of light (2Corinthians 11:14). That is, they may appear good, sound good and have a form of righteousness but are not of God. This is how false religions and cults win converts. Obvious temptations we may readily recognise, but when truth is twisted and mixed with error spiritual discernment is crucial (Hebrews 5:14). It is a battle between two words - the word of God versus the lies of the devil. This is why it is essential we feed constantly upon God's word to know and discern what is true.

God will protect us from Satan (2 Thessalonians 3:3 and 1 John 5:18) but we must submit ourselves to God, obey his word, stand firm, resist the devil and not give him an opportunity (either by thought or action) through putting on the full armour of God, especially the shield of faith (Ephesians 4:27, 6:11,16).

Submit therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you (James 4:7)

If we diligently do these things we will not be deceived.

The Spiritual Battle and How to Wage it

The greatest battle will not come through an obvious temptation to sin or even persecution but through deception in a religious guise. Jesus tells us that at the end time satanic deception will be at its zenith, deceiving, if it were possible even the elect (Matthew 24:24). This is why it is essential we know God's word through reading the Bible and personal communion with him in prayer. This requires an active mind-set because a passive mind is fertile ground for deception.

Paul tells us the nature of this battle and how to fight it:

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might. Put on the full armour of God, so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places (Ephesians 6:10-12).

Our battle is ultimately against unseen spiritual powers, not against fellow humans. He tells us to put on truth and righteousness, to be ready with the gospel of peace, with faith as a shield, assured by the knowledge of our salvation and God's word, and to pray at all times in the Spirit (6:13-18). And as Jesus said "*Keep watching and praying that you may not enter into temptation; the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak*" (Matthew 26:41).

This battle against the world, the flesh and the devil requires our constant diligence and discipline and will be fought as long as we live in this world. Yet it is in God's strength we do battle, not our own.

The horse is prepared for the day of battle, but victory belongs to the LORD (Proverbs 21:31).

Since sin begins with a thought we need to take control of our thoughts before they become an act. James warns us how desire progresses to sin:

Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death (James 1:13-15).

How can we counteract Satan's temptations? With God's word - like Jesus did in his time of temptation (Matthew 4:1-10). We can say with full authority: "Satan - you have no authority over me, when Christ died I died and I belong to him."

Temptations rarely come in an obviously evil form but rather they will come in a way which seems nice, pleasant, gratifying and pleasing to our old nature, but contrary to God's word. This is the deceptive nature of sin. As it was in the Garden of Eden when Eve was tempted. Satan's words sounded good but were contrary to what God had said.

Sin has its root in an attitude of wanting our own way or to please man rather than God. Therefore, we should not blame circumstances, other people and especially not God (James 1:13-15). When we blame God, or are angry with him, we are in danger of developing a hardened and bitter heart. This does not mean we will not struggle, at times, in our understanding of God's ways when we are deeply hurt or disappointed. Though we may not understand why such has happened, it is crucial our faith in him remain.

Pride is the root of many sins. Once pride enters it opens a door to other sins (and often ones of a sexual nature) which can easily be justified because of our perceived self importance. This has been the root sin of many fallen Christian leaders.

Nor should we trifle with temptation thinking we can later confess and ask forgiveness. To do such is putting God to the test (1 Corinthians 10:9). If we have no fear of God and believe there is no eternal consequence to sin, our will to resist temptation is seriously weakened (for more on this see : *Are We 'Once Saved Always Saved'?* p 112)

We may at times face despair and it seems all hope is lost. In such times, faith in and obedience to God will see us through. Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane faced his greatest trial. Unlike the modern day superheroes portrayed on the screen as unflinching in the face of danger or defeat, Jesus showed true human weakness. He prayed that he not have to endure the suffering of the cross, yet submitted his will to the Father's. He remained faithful and obedient even when separated from his Father, in agony on the cross crying out "*My God, my God why have you forsaken me*?"

Some of the greatest battles we face may not be the ones we consider great but may come about just by living and being faithful to Christ in the daily grind of life - in our homes and workplaces which we are most familiar with. It is in these places we need to show a Christ-like attitude - a servant rather than self-serving attitude and be content within the circumstances of our life, be they humble or not.

The path of victory is always through faith in Christ as we put off the deeds of our old self and put on the new self created by God. We put off hate and put on love, replace unforgiveness with forgiveness, judgement with mercy, words of malice with words of grace, pride with humility, lies with speaking the truth, impatience with patience, lust with purity, indifference with compassion, abuse with kindness, selfishness with generosity, greed with self-control, doubt with faith, conflict with peace and depression with hope.

Above all, have a sincere knowledge and implicit trust in God’s word, the Bible, without which we will be like ships without a rudder or anchor.

Prayer

If Jesus, the Son of God, needed to pray in his time of testing, then how much more do we? It has been said '*As air is to our body so prayer is to our spirit*'. Prayer shows our *dependence* as a child on our Father in heaven. We are encouraged not to be anxious, but to give thanks and make our requests known to God (Philippians 4:6). In Paul's instruction to put on the armour of God we are urged to pray at *all* times in the Spirit (Ephesians 6:10-18) – not just when we feel the need.

Praise

In the same way it can be said we ought to praise and give thanks to God. 100 times in the Psalms we are exhorted to praise God for what he has done and what he will do. As it was with David, our praise should be the outflow of a heart of gratitude and love for God:

I will bless the LORD at all times; His praise shall continually be in my mouth (Psalm 34:1).

While prayer shows our dependence on God, praise shows our *gratitude*. We should praise God as part of prayer and through song. Praise should be the natural response to his salvation:

The LORD is my strength and song, And He has become my salvation; This is my God, and I will praise Him; My father's God, and I will extol Him (Exodus 15:2).

Note Paul's encouragement to be '*filled with the Spirit*' is in the context of '*singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord*' and '*giving thanks always for all things to God*' (Ephesians 5:18-20). When we are at the end of our own strength God's strength will sustain us.

My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever (Psalm 73:26).

The Bible

God's will is revealed through his word and the Holy Spirit. This will come principally through reading the Bible. It is our indispensable, infallible guide and reference. As the Psalmist says:

How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, nor stand in the path of sinners, nor sit in the seat of scoffers! But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and in His law he meditates day and night (Psalm 1:1-2).

And

How can a young man keep his way pure? By keeping it according to Your word (Psalm 119:9)

Reading the Bible may seem difficult, but persist. Renewing our minds takes time and perseverance.

By God's word we are able to discern truth and error. Through the Scriptures we are corrected and trained in righteousness so that we will be equipped and prepared to do every good work (2 Timothy 3:16-17). Clearly the Bible has a very practical purpose and is not just for intellectual curiosity.

We also need to hear God's word spoken through fellow Christians. This is why we are encouraged not to neglect meeting regularly with other Christians in church and home settings. Like the Berean Christians (Acts 17:11), we should check what we have heard from others against God's word as revealed in the Bible to ensure that it is the truth. If we neglect to do these we are in danger of deception, unable to test and discern false teaching - from men or from the spirit realm. Deception will only increase as the end draws nearer.

The greatest danger in this day is not from a false religion such as Islam, but in a counterfeit Christianity, which has the outward form but lacks the substance and power of the true faith. Such

'Christianity' will selectively quote Scripture (as did Satan) but inevitably fails to declare the *whole* counsel of God. It may sound good, logical and appealing but a distortion of the truth, a half truth which is more dangerous than an outright lie. False teaching finds receptive ground in those who know something of God's word, but not enough to discern error. The Psalmist says:

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path (Psalm 119:105).

The writer to the Hebrews encourages us to feed on the solid food of God's word, the word of righteousness, not just the milk, if we are to discern good and evil (Hebrews 5:12-14).

Pastors, shepherds of the flock, have a particular responsibility to teach the whole counsel of God impartially and will be held to account by Jesus on the day of judgement. It is a serious neglect to not teach parts of scripture truthfully for fear of offending people.

Persevere

To walk with God in this world requires perseverance. Forgiveness of our sins and justification occur in a moment but growth in holiness takes time. New habits need to be learned moment by moment. So persevere. If you fall, get up, repent and keep going.

One of Satan's strategies is to discourage us and cause us to lose hope. Like soldiers on active service and athletes in a race, self-discipline and keeping the goal in mind is vital. As Paul says, '*Run in such a way that you may win*' (1 Corinthians 9:24). An athlete trains both his body and mind to win. He knows there can only be one winner, but that does not deter him. His goal is to win. In the same way, though we may fail at times, let's get up and continue with the intention to finish the race and win in the knowledge God's strength will sustain us.

Faith is inspired by the example of others in the faith - like the cloud of witnesses in Hebrews 11. This is why reading biographies of others who have endured much for the sake of Christ can be so encouraging.

Salvation is God's doing, so be on guard against thoughts of pride or self righteousness such as "*I have overcome sin by my own strength*". If we repent, it is because God has given us the opportunity. If we are forgiven, it is only by the precious blood of Christ. If we are saved from the penalty and power of sin, it is through the cross of Christ. Through his resurrection he has given us life. We have his word as a light to guide us, brothers and sisters to help bear our load and the Holy Spirit to guide and comfort us. Therefore give thanks, praise and the credit to God alone.

Warnings About Departing From God

It may be difficult but we must face honestly and take to heart some of the warnings of Scripture - those which, plainly stated, show how we can depart from God and not enter into his final rest if they are not taken seriously. While they may make us feel uncomfortable, they are for our good. They are written so we will be forewarned and prepared for the potential trials and temptations which can cause us to depart from the road to life.

The example of Israel

Israel, through faith, was saved from Pharaoh and Egypt (Hebrews 11:29) by passing through the Red Sea. Yet most did not enter the Promised Land, because they did not continue in faith and obedience to God. This serves as an example and a warning to us today as we read in Paul's letter to the Corinthians:

Now these things happened as examples for us, so that we would not crave evil things as they also craved. Do not be idolaters, as some of them were; as it is written, "the people sat down to eat and drink, and stood up to play." Nor let us act

immorally, as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in one day. Nor let us try the Lord, as some of them did, and were destroyed by the serpents. Nor grumble, as some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer. Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come. Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed that he does not fall (1 Corinthians 10:6-12).

Israel did not take possession of the Promised Land without having to conquer seven enemies, residents in the land. This serves also as an example of the spiritual battle we face before we inherit God's kingdom. So we cannot be complacent even though we have believed and become God's people.

Jude also reminds us with the example of Israel:

Now I desire to remind you, though you know all things once for all, that the Lord, after saving a people out of the land of Egypt, subsequently destroyed those who did not believe (Jude 1:5).

Paul in his letter to the Christians in Rome cautions us not to be self-confident but be humble, faithful and obedient, again giving the example of Israel:

Quite right, they (Israel) *were broken off for their unbelief, but you stand by your faith. Do not be conceited, but fear; for if God did not spare the natural branches, He will not spare you, either. Behold then the kindness and severity of God; to those who fell, severity, but to you, God's kindness, if you continue in His kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off. And they also, if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again* (Romans 11:20-23).

The writer to the Hebrews gives a similar warning not to be complacent:

Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us fear lest any of you should seem to have failed to reach it (Hebrews 4:1) and to *be diligent to enter that rest* (4:11).

Other scriptures from the parables of Jesus and the book of Hebrews on this subject will be considered later (*Building On the Rock of Scripture*).

It is not God's will that any perish. He saves us by grace, through faith, so we can enter his kingdom and final rest. But we should not think our efforts in any way merit his grace. Our gratitude and willing obedience are the proper and humble response to God's grace.

It may be asked "*How far can I go away from God before I will be cut off?*" Scripture doesn't give an answer to such a question. God only knows. It is a bit like asking "*How close can I get to the edge of a cliff without falling over?*" It is a question we shouldn't ask since we should want to keep as far away as we can. It should be the same with sin.

Throughout Scripture we are warned of the consequences of continuing in unrighteous behaviour:

Or do you not know that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, shall inherit the kingdom of God (1 Corinthians 6:9, 10).

We find similar warnings also in Paul's letters to the Galatians and Ephesians. Those who practice unrighteous behaviour have no inheritance in God's kingdom (Galatians 5:19-21; Ephesians 5:5).

As John writes:

No one who abides in Him sins; no one who sins has seen Him or knows Him. Little children, make sure no one deceives you; the one who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous; the one who practices sin is of the devil; for the devil has sinned from the beginning. The Son of God appeared for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil. No one who is born of God practices sin, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God. By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious: anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor the one who does not love his brother (1 John 3:6-10).

God disciplines his people

A loving parent disciplines their child for their own good so they will grow to be responsible and caring adults. In the same way God lovingly disciplines his children that they might learn to be like him – holy and righteous (Hebrews 12:10). Discipline is never pleasant and God disciplines us through trials which test and grow our faith and obedience.

Through physical training we can grow physically stronger. Likewise we grow spiritually stronger through circumstances which require us to use the divine abilities we were given when God saved us. God's discipline is always redemptive in purpose, to draw us back or closer to him and to make us like Jesus. We shouldn't misunderstand it as punishment. However, if we knowingly continue to sin, God may cause sickness or some other misfortune to come on us with the purpose of bringing us to repentance (for example: 1Corinthians 5:5 & Revelation 2:21-23).

Growing through suffering

Suffering and persecution might seem to some as though we have earned God’s disfavour, yet if we suffer for doing right we find favour with God (1 Peter 2:19-20). Through such times of suffering we learn to first trust God, since he intends that all things work for good for those who love him. We learn patience,

endurance and to love and forgive those who cause suffering to us.

We have many examples of suffering in the Bible where people of God, not only endured, but maintained a positive witness throughout. Joseph suffered treachery at the hand of his own brothers, from his master and forgotten by another whom he had helped. Yet, though wrongly enslaved and imprisoned, he did not wallow in self-pity but resolved to serve as best he could those who were over him. As a result God blessed him and he became the means of saving his family through a time of severe famine. So we too, when faced with injustice, should not indulge in self-pity or take revenge, but resolve to serve God and do good even to those who don't deserve it.

Jesus gave us the ultimate example of suffering – unjustly accused, crucified and laying down his own life that we might live. He remained faithful to his Father while on the cross and separated from him. When Jesus said "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me*?" it was a time of ultimate testing. We too might have times in our lives when all seems lost, God is distant or absent and our prayers unheard. Yet these are the times when our faith is tested and, when we have come through it, we will find ourselves stronger and better people for it. As the writer to the Hebrews encourages us, we are disciplined for our good so we might share God's holiness:

For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood in your striving against sin; and you have forgotten the exhortation which is addressed to you as sons, "my son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor faint when you are reproved by Him; for those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and He scourges every son whom He receives."

It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline?

But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Furthermore, we had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them; shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits, and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He disciplines us for our good, so that we may share His holiness.

All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness. (Hebrews 12:3-11)

Discipline, suffering and trials can come in many forms - through other people, sickness, accidents, financial hardship and even natural disasters. It is through such trials that God forms the character of Jesus in us. It can be said God forges our being in the fires of affliction. As Peter encourages us:

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation (1 Peter 4:12,13).

So don't be discouraged in such times and think God is punishing us or has rejected us. As God tells Jeremiah:

For the Lord will not reject forever, for if He causes grief, then He will have compassion according to His abundant loving-kindness. For He does not afflict willingly or grieve the sons of men (Lamentations 3:31-33).

God disciplines those He loves. We should, though, first ask ourselves "Is there sin in my life that I need to repent of?" If our conscience is clear then we should ask "What is God teaching me through this trial?" When we trust God in such times his peace and joy will sustain us (John 16:33).

Expect persecution

As Christians we can expect hostility from the world:

Do not be surprised, brethren, if the world hates you (1 John 3:13).

And we can expect to be persecuted when we live for Christ:

Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted (1Timothy 3:12 ESV).

Persecution is a sure indication that we belong to Jesus. Why? The world hates us because our hope and loyalty are in God's kingdom, not in this world. So if we find ourselves in persecution we should not despair. Knowing our goal and the promises of God will keep our hope and faith alive. With this in mind we can truly give thanks and praise to God. When Paul and Silas were imprisoned they sang hymns of praise to God (Acts 16:25). Spiritual songs are a source of strength as Paul tells us:

Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God (Colossians 3:16).

We can be encouraged with these words:

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us (Romans 8:18).

God's strength when we are weak

When we humbly acknowledge our weakness, God's power can work in us. Like Paul, we should have this attitude:

And He has said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness." Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am well content with weaknesses,

with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong (2 Corinthians 12:9,10).

God does not expect of us what we are not able to do. By his grace he provides us with the power and strength to do his will. As we read in Isaiah:

They who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint (Isaiah 40:31 ESV).

Therefore, as we prepare for the spiritual battle, heed God's warnings and submit to his discipline, we will find in God's word every encouragement to endure suffering, trials and persecution so that we will grow strong in faith and not fall:

that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God. May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son (Colossians 1:9-13 ESV).

Building On the Rock of Scripture

Scripture contains wonderful promises but also sober warnings. God, as a loving Father, has given us these warnings to prepare us for the trials and temptations we will encounter in this world. Through God's word, the Bible, we will learn, grow and be strengthened so that we will be able to endure the trials of life.

The Parable of the House Built on the Rock

Why do you call Me 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say? Everyone who comes to Me and hears My words and acts on them, I will show you whom he is like: he is like a man building a house, who dug deep and laid a foundation on the rock; and when a flood occurred, the torrent burst against that house and could not shake it, because it had been well built. But the one who has heard and has not acted accordingly, is like a man who built a house on the ground without any foundation; and the torrent burst against it and immediately it collapsed, and the ruin of that house was great (Luke 6:46-49).

In the parallel passage of Matthew 7:21-27 Jesus said there would be people who call him 'Lord' and perform miracles in his name yet do not act on his words and, in a time of testing, do not stand. Faith is grown and strengthened by action. It cannot be passive. We may have heard and believed but are we *doing* what Jesus said? It is those who do God's will who enter his kingdom.

The Parable of the Sower

Now the parable is this: the seed is the word of God. Those beside the road are those who have heard; then the devil comes and takes away the word from their heart, so that they will not believe and be saved. Those on the rocky soil are those who, when they hear, receive the word with joy; and these have no firm root; they believe for a while, and in time of temptation fall away.

The seed which fell among the thorns, these are the ones who have heard, and as they go on their way they are choked with worries and riches and pleasures of this life, and bring no fruit to maturity. But the seed in the good soil, these are the ones who have heard the word in an honest and good heart, and hold it fast, and bear fruit with perseverance" (Luke 8:11-15).

This parable tells us:

1. There are those who hear the Gospel and the words of Christ. There is conviction – the words were in their heart but they do not respond with repentance and faith. What they have heard the devil takes away, they do not believe and so are not saved.

2. Then there are those who receive the Word, believe and so are saved from their sins. There is life, and for a time growth but they only believe for a while and in a time of temptation fall away because they have no firm root. That is, they, like the man who built his house on the ground without foundation, did not continue to believe and act on Jesus' words.

3. Then there are those who hear the word but do not bring fruit to maturity because of love of and care for the things of this world more than the kingdom of God.

4. Those who have heard, with a honest and good heart, who continue to believe and hold fast by perseverance, bear fruit.

Is the condition of the soil (our heart) something we have no control over? Jesus' parable does not suggest this. Note: the word is sown in our *heart* but it is how we *respond* to the word that will determine whether we bear fruit or not. Jesus goes on to say:

"*So take care how you listen; for whoever has, to him more shall be given; and whoever does not have, even what he thinks he has shall be taken away from him*." … *"My mother and My brothers are these who hear the word of God and do it."* (Luke 6:18 & 21)

So it is possible to have once believed, but unless we heed and obey Jesus' words by continuing to believe, that is be faithful by resisting temptation and love for this world and persevering in trial we are in danger of being unfruitful.

The Dangers of Drifting Away

The book of Hebrews contains a number of warnings to all Christians about departing from God and failing to enter God's final rest.

The warnings are intended for our good, so that we will not fail to enter God's kingdom. Also in this book are many encouragements so we might not lose heart in times of trial. While the writer addresses this letter to those from a Jewish background, the warnings are not uniquely to them but apply to all Christians. The writer reaffirms that salvation is through faith in Christ, not through the law and addresses a number of concerns including complacency towards sin, of their need to learn again the basics of the Faith, lack of growth and neglect of meeting with fellow Christians. Yet this letter also contains much assurance (see *Assurance* p 132).

The first warning is this:

For this reason we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away. For if the word spoken through angels proved unalterable, and every transgression and disobedience received a just recompense, how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? (Hebrews 2:1-3).

This tells us two things: 1. we can be encouraged because we have *so great a salvation* 2. but it is possible to *neglect* our salvation through wilful disobedience and as a consequence incur God's judgement. This caution appears after the writer has reminded the Christians that Jesus is God's last word. There is no one else - not angels or Moses through whom there is or will be salvation. The writer encourages us to pay close attention to what

we have heard, that is the words spoken by Jesus, lest we drift away. Attention and obedience to the words of Jesus are necessary for us to remain anchored to him.

The danger of drifting, of complacency towards sin

The danger of drifting, of complacency towards sin, can be easily ignored, for if we do nothing the currents, tides and temptations of life in this world gradually but surely take us away from our goal. It takes no effort to drift - just give in to the pressures of life and temptation. It is easy and comforting. For a time all may seem well, but like a ship without a rudder, caught in a current driving it towards a treacherous reef, there comes a time of reckoning. Like the five unprepared virgins, it will be too late. Hence the writer's solemn warning '*how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation*'.

The next warning:

Therefore, just as the Holy Spirit says, "Today if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as when they provoked Me as in the day of trial in the wilderness, where your fathers tried Me by testing Me, and saw my works for forty years. Therefore I was angry with this generation, and said, 'They always go astray in their heart and they did not know my ways' as I swore in my wrath, 'They shall not enter my rest.'

Take care, brethren, lest there should be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart, in falling away from the living God. But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called "Today," lest anyone of you be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end (Hebrews 3:7-14).

Here the writer gives the example of Israel in the wilderness and how we can learn from them and not fall into the same errors. He warns of the deceitfulness of sin and how it leads to a hardened and unbelieving heart. The end result, if not repented of,

is to fall away from God - that is, to be separated from him and his life.

Further in this passage (Hebrews 3:15 - 4:11) we read '*Therefore, let us fear if, while a promise remains of entering His rest, any one of you may seem to have come short of it'* (4:1) - a warning against unbelief and then '*Therefore let us be diligent to enter that rest, so that no one will fall, through following the same example of disobedience'* (4:11) - a warning against disobedience. Obedience proceeds from faith and disobedience from unbelief. As the writer also says: '*He* (Jesus) *became to all those who obey Him the source of eternal salvation*' (5:9).

Next we have a warning about falling away:

For in the case of those who have once been enlightened and have tasted of the heavenly gift and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, it is impossible to renew them again to repentance, since they again crucify to themselves the Son of God and put Him to open shame.

For ground that drinks the rain which often falls on it and brings forth vegetation useful to those for whose sake it is also tilled, receives a blessing from God; but if it yields thorns and thistles, it is worthless and close to being cursed, and it ends up being burned (Hebrews 6:4-8).

This passage is often regarded as being problematic or difficult. Yet it plainly speaks of those who, by any normal definition are, or were, Christians who had experienced regeneration.

They were enlightened - a term used to distinguish from those still in spiritual darkness. They were not just people who had heard the truth but had received and understood it.

They had tasted the heavenly gift - means they had experienced, not merely heard of or sampled.

They had been made partakers of the Holy Spirit. That is, they were sharers in and had received the Holy Spirit. The word 'partaker' is also used to describe their heavenly calling and relationship with Christ (see Hebrews 3:1 and 14).

They had tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come. They had experienced the good benefits of the word of God and the Holy Spirit in their lives.

And then have fallen away - they have departed from the way of God and Christ. This refers, not to falling into sin, which we all can at times, but that they have ceased to follow Christ and gone back to their old way of life.

It is impossible to renew them again to repentance. In other words, there is no second chance. They cannot be saved again.

They again crucify to themselves the Son of God and put Him to open shame. That is, Christ who once bore their sins on the cross, is held again to shame and his sacrifice for them has been in vain (see 1 Peter 2:24). Paul similarly expressed his sorrow over those who, by their manner of life '*walk...enemies of the cross of Christ*' (Philippians 3:18).

The ground that yields thorns and thistles is worthless and ends up being burned. A life that does not bear good fruit, like the fruitless branches of the vine (John 15), is destroyed by fire.

Strong words, which tragically some Christians try to lessen by saying they refer only to *professing* Christians. Yet the same terminology - enlightened, tasted, partakers or sharers, repentance and bearing of our sins by Christ on the cross, are used elsewhere in Scripture of true Christians.

The writer then tells us of the danger of wilfully continuing in sin:

For if we go on sinning wilfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a

certain terrifying expectation of judgement, and the fury of a fire which will consume the adversaries. Anyone who has set aside the Law of Moses dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has insulted the Spirit of grace?

For we know Him who said, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay." And again, "The Lord will judge His people." It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God (Hebrews 10:26-31).

First, the writer says if *we* go on sinning wilfully. He addresses them as 'holy brethren', 'partakers of a heavenly calling' and includes himself. There should be no doubt he is referring to Christians.

They had received the knowledge of the truth. They hadn't just heard the gospel but had believed and acted on it. Jesus said '*You will know the truth and the truth will set you free*' (John 8:32). The knowledge of the truth is a characteristic of those who have been saved (see Titus 1:1 and 2:4).

There no longer remains a sacrifice. Christ was and is the only sacrifice for sin. Yet this speaks of the possibility that Christ's sacrifice will no longer be available for a Christian who wilfully continues to sin.

A certain terrifying expectation of judgement. If Christ's sacrifice is no longer available then we face only judgement.

How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve? If those who transgressed Moses' law died physically, what could be worse?

Trampled underfoot the Son of God. This speaks of effectively abusing what Christ has done for us at the Cross.

Regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified. Only Christians have been sanctified by the blood of Christ (see Luke 22:20 and 1 Peter 1:2).

And has insulted the Spirit of grace. Only those who have received God's grace could do this. Jude also warned of those who turn the grace of God into an excuse to live immorally (Jude 4).

Conclusion

The seriousness of these warnings should create in us a healthy fear of God. There are many more scriptures which warn and encourage us to keep the faith that was taught to us by Jesus and the apostles. I would simply encourage you: read your Bible, especially the New Testament which is directed to us under the New Covenant. The Bible itself, the Holy Spirit and a humble spirit are all you need to learn what God wants you to know.

Remember God loves us and it is not his will that any perish but that we *all come to repentance* (2 Peter 3:9). So these warnings are not to discourage us but to prepare and train us. God, by his grace, has given us his Spirit by which we are able to overcome the world, the flesh and the devil. Through Jesus we are strengthened and able to do all things (Philippians 4:13) and by his might and power be steadfast with patience and joy (Colossians 1:11). Jesus intercedes for us and should we sin, provided we repent and confess, he will forgive and cleanse us (1 John 1:9). Therefore never despair or lose hope in God's love and mercy for us.

Are We 'Once Saved Always Saved'?

I was a member of a church some years ago where a young man was saved from a selfish and rebellious lifestyle. He married a dedicated Christian woman and together they enthusiastically led the youth ministry of the church. I regularly met him travelling to work on the train and we often discussed spiritual matters. Then there came a time when he seemed to change. He lost interest in the youth ministry, discussing spiritual things and his marriage began to fracture. Then it was discovered he was leading a double lifestyle - he was homosexual. He left his wife and the church. After the initial shock and sorrow questions were asked - "Was he really a Christian?" "Was he really saved?"

No doubt many of us know of similar scenarios where a Christian of some standing, maybe someone we love, who has gone into sin and perhaps also lost faith and left the church. Where do such people stand before God? Some would say if he had put his faith in Christ at one time then he is still ultimately eternally secure in Christ although he may suffer loss of reward in the life to come. Others would say that if he were truly a Christian he would not have gone into such sin, left the faith and the church. In their view it is those who persevere who show themselves to be true Christians.

The tragedy of the young man above is that he received 'assurance' of his eternal salvation at a time when he was struggling with his sin. Did this 'assurance' of his eternal salvation effectively nullify his will to fight sin? Does unconditional eternal security teaching effectively nullify the fear of God (which is the beginning of wisdom) and replace it with a false assurance based upon a onetime act of faith in Christ? Clearly this subject is a serious one, at the heart of the Christian faith and one that should be understood by all, not just theologians.

Eternal security or '*once saved always saved*' is defined in various ways but essentially says this:

Once a person has believed in Christ for the forgiveness of his sins, on the promise of John 3:16, he receives eternal life. Since this life is eternal it cannot be lost or forfeited.

Many have tackled the issue of whether a Christian, having been saved, can subsequently be eternally lost but this must ultimately be decided by Scripture. It is a vitally important issue - as important as knowing how we can be saved in the first place. Knowing the possibility (if it exists) of *not* inheriting the kingdom of God surely is as important as knowing how we do enter the kingdom. I have noticed this is not an issue which new Christians think about, but rather those who have been Christians for some time.

The teaching that faith alone, apart from a life consistent with Jesus' teaching, is sufficient to ensure we get to Heaven tragically distorts God's redemptive plan for us. It effectively nullifies personal responsibility and the fear of God, the beginning of knowledge (Proverbs 1:7).

Salvation is for God's glory

The object of God's redemptive plan is not simply to save us from hell but '*...to redeem us from every lawless deed, and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds*.' (Titus 2:14) and to be '*a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvellous light*'.(1 Peter 2:9).

So any account of God's salvation which merely states what God does for us does a great injustice. It is man centred, not God centred. We are saved, not just for our sake, but for God's glory.

Saved by grace plus works?

'*Once saved, always saved*", or '*Once in grace always in grace*' as it also is expressed, has been an integral part of the teaching of many churches since the Reformation five centuries ago. For some Christians, to question or deny this is to say that Christ's sacrifice is insufficient for our sins and imply we are saved by our own works. But this is a misunderstanding.

It is true, we can fall into the error of justifying ourselves before God by works of righteousness as Paul states in this blunt warning to the Galatians:

You have been severed from Christ, you who are seeking to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace (Galatians 5:4).

If we try to justify ourselves before God through our own efforts, we make the grace of God in Christ of no effect. We can only be justified before God by his grace and through our faith in Christ and what he has done for us. As Paul says:

But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Saviour appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Saviour, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life (Titus 3:4-7).

However, justification through faith in Christ is not the only truth we need to consider.

The Reformation re-established the truth of salvation by grace through faith. A great and enlightening truth this was, that liberated those who were in spiritual ignorance and fear, and who were trying to obtain salvation through their own efforts.

But like all of God's revelation, it was a part not the whole, an important truth, not *the* most important truth. There is a danger in

making one truth the foundational or central truth. In reality it is *Jesus* himself, who is the Truth, the Word of God, and the foundation. In the re-discovery of a truth we can, in our zeal, over emphasise this one truth to the neglect of others. There is a particular danger that, in wanting to distance ourselves from anything that could be construed as salvation by our own efforts, we fall into the second valley of error: that it is unnecessary to live righteously to enter God's kingdom. Scripture teaches us that entering God's kingdom is also conditional on what we do:

Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter (Matthew 7:21).

Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God (1 Corinthians 6:9-10).

And there are many others such as Matthew 25:21 and 34, Mark 9:43-47 and Ephesians 5:5.

Our good works never merit God's grace but Scripture solemnly warns that those who wilfully continue in sin will be excluded from God's kingdom. This is not a contradiction. God's grace frees us from the burden of trying to make ourselves right before him. Now, having been made right with God by his grace, through faith in Christ, we show our faith through our obedience (James 2:18).

What the Reformation Established

The most important truth re-established during the Reformation was the supremacy of scripture over church authority and tradition. It is on the authority of scripture that every other truth is established.

It is not difficult to find scriptures which support all theological traditions, from universal salvation (which says God will in the end save everyone) to those who maintain only practising members of their particular church denomination are the elect or chosen of God who will be saved. How can we know who is right when two or more contradictory theologies claim scriptural authority? Theological tradition can be a potential source of error if it becomes our primary source of truth rather than what is plainly revealed in God's word – the Bible.

Of one thing we can be certain: the Bible does not contradict itself, since all Scripture is God-breathed (2 Timothy 3:16). So even, if to us, there appears to be a contradiction then we ought to let it remain an apparent contradiction rather than try to reinterpret God's words to harmonise with our understanding. For example, God's predestination and man's free will are often seen as contradictory doctrines and so one may be emphasised to the neglect or detriment of the other. Could it be that both are true? Human logic says 'No', but what is human logic to God's wisdom plainly stated in Scripture?

'O*nce saved always saved*' is an inference based on but not explicitly stated in Scripture. So while this teaching rightly reveals the great promises and assurances we have in Christ, it does not impartially teach the *whole* of scripture. By giving greater emphasis to certain scriptures rather than giving equal importance to all relevant scriptures, it creates a hierarchy in scripture which should not exist. This eventually causes scripture to be pitted against scripture. Consequently the term 'problem' or 'difficult' scriptures is often used when one or a number of scriptures appear to contradict others. Once we see a passage in scripture as being 'difficult' or a 'problem' the problem may be our presuppositions, not Scripture itself.

The Scriptural Basis for Once Saved Always Saved

Here are some of the scriptures upon which the '*once saved always saved*' teaching is based and my comments.

1. My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand (John 10.27-29).

This is certainly a promise of great assurance to those who follow Jesus. He gives them eternal life, they never perish and no one is able to snatch them from his or the Father's hand. However, this is not an unconditional promise since Jesus says his sheep are those who *hear* his voice and *follow* him, that is obey him. The tense is *present*, that is, not just having once heard and followed but of continuing to hear and follow.

The term '*sheep*' is a metaphor for those having the spiritual nature of willing obedience to Jesus' commands. Once a sheep does not necessarily mean always a sheep. Just as a sinner can become a saint through God's grace, a saint can become a sinner through his own wilfulness. In the same way a 'sheep' can become a 'goat'. So while we continue to hear, follow and obey Jesus we will be his sheep, have eternal life, never perish nor be snatched from his hand.

Similarly, in 2 Peter 2 we read about false teachers who are compared to dogs and sows. Some argue that God does not refer to his people as such and therefore this passage refers to those who were never saved. As 'sheep' is a metaphor for those who follow Christ, we should see that 'dogs' and 'sows' are metaphors for the fallen spiritual condition of these false teachers who go back into sin, not that they were never saved from their sins.

It should be noted that these teachers had at one time *believed*, for they were *bought* by Christ (that is, they were redeemed - see

verse 1), they had *escaped* sin through the knowledge of Jesus and *knew* (not just heard) the way of righteousness. Yet their final condition is worse than when they did not know Christ.

2. *Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? Just as it is written, "For your sake we are being put to death all day long; we were considered as sheep to be slaughtered." But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord* (Romans 8.35-39).

Again, this is a passage of much assurance. No circumstance or spiritual power can separate us from the love of God. However note the context: it refers to those *who love God*, who are called according to his purpose (v 28). Those who love God are those who keep his commandments. This scripture does not say that *nothing* can separate us from God's love, but no other *created* thing. That is, there is no power, circumstance or person outside ourselves that can separate us from the love of God. It is as we obey Jesus' commandments that we remain in his love:

If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love; just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love (John 15:10).

However, sin will separate us from God unless we repent:

I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish (Luke 13:3).

It is said that when Christ died on the cross he died for all our sins - past, present and future. This is true, but this does not mean we do not need to repent of them (1 John 1:9). Paul mourned for those who had sinned in the past and not repented. Why would he

mourn if their initial repentance was sufficient to ensure their eternal salvation? (2 Corinthians 12:21).

3. *For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life* (John 3:16).

Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgement, but has passed out of death into life (John 5:24).

It is held that someone who believes *has* eternal life, it is a present possession and since it is eternal it cannot be lost. Two things need to be noted: 1. The tense of *believe* is present, of *continuing* belief, not just that of a single act or occasion. 2. Eternal life is not independent of Jesus. We must have the Son and remain in him to continue having eternal life (1John 5:11,12). Eternal life is Christ's life in us.

There are a number of scriptures which indicate that one can be bought to life in Christ and yet die, spiritually, again:

So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh- for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live (Romans 8:12-13).

Living according to the flesh, as opposed to being led by the Spirit of God, will result in death. It cannot be referring to physical death since all (except those alive when Christ returns) will experience it. Paul warns the Galatians similarly:

Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life (Galatians 6:7,8).

James similarly warned of the downward path beginning with desires that lead to sin which finally leads to death (James 1:14-

16). Jude also alluded to this when he spoke of those who were '*twice dead*' meaning they were once dead, come to life and then died again (Jude 12).

John says a brother can sin to the point resulting in spiritual death:

If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not leading to death, he shall ask and God will for him give life to those who commit sin not leading to death. There is a sin leading to death; I do not say that he should make request for this (1 John 5:16).

As we saw earlier, eternal life is not something we have independent of Christ, but is in him only. If, as Paul wrote to the Romans, we are cut off from Christ, we are cut off from his life. Eternal life then, is dependent on our continuing to believe and remain in Christ.

4. *All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day."* (John 6:37-40 ESV).

We have here the wonderful assurance of the Father and the Son working together for our eternal salvation. Yet we cannot come to Jesus unless the Father first draw us (v 44) and we cannot come to God unless we first believe he is and seek him (Hebrews 11:6). As the Holy Spirit convicts us, God grants us repentance leading us to Christ for the forgiveness of our sins.

Those who come to Christ will not be turned away whether they have committed few or many sins. Nor is it God's intention that any should be lost, but raised up on the last day. We see also in this passage the mystery of both God's will (all the Father gives

to Jesus) and man's (everyone who believes) in operation. Our continued faith will assure our being raised by Jesus on the last day.

5. *Therefore He is able also to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them* (Hebrews 7.25).

For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified. (Hebrews 10:14 ESV).

These verses give us the assurance Jesus is the final means of salvation. He is able to save forever those who draw near to God through him. We have too the great assurance of Christ's intercession for us. Jesus' work for us is complete, but our faith and obedience are still necessary as explained previously. As the writer to the Hebrews informs us:

And having been made perfect, He became to all those who obey Him the source of eternal salvation, (Hebrews 5:9)

Jesus, by his offering, his sacrifice, once for all time, has secured redemption, justification, sanctification, forgiveness of sins and peace with God for those who are being sanctified. However, if we wilfully continue to sin there *no longer* remains a sacrifice for sins (Hebrews 10:26).

6. *For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus* (Philippians 1:6).

This verse is often understood to mean God, having begun his work of salvation in us, will ensure it will be completed on the day of Christ. That is we cannot depart from the faith, since God ensures we won't. However, the context of this verse is the Philippians' participation in *the gospel* (v 5). That is, the good work is their support for the defence and furthering of the gospel, not salvation.

7. *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time* (1 Peter 1:3-5).

A great promise of the inheritance prepared for us and God's power to keep and protect us. As long as we continue in faith we are assured of this promise.

8. *For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable* (Romans 11:29).

In context, this is referring to the promises God made to the patriarchs - Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, which Israel, the people inherited. God will not revoke the promise made to them.

9. *In Him, you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation - having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of God's own possession, to the praise of His glory* (Ephesians 1.13,14).

God's gift of the Holy Spirit is given as a seal of our redemption and future inheritance. '*Sealed*' needs to be understood as an authenticating sign of God's work and ownership of us (as it is used elsewhere in the New Testament). However, the continued indwelling of the Holy Spirit is conditional on our continuing in faith and obedience:

And we are witnesses of these things; and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey Him (Acts 5:32).

For it is possible to share in the gift of the Holy Spirit and yet fall away (Hebrews 6:4).

10. *Make sure that your character is free from the love of money, being content with what you have; for He Himself has said, "I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you"* (Hebrews 13:5).

A great assurance that God is with us through times of trial and provides for our needs. Though God promises not to desert us, we can desert him through neglect or wilful sin.

11. *Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to make you stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy* (Jude 24).

A great promise of God's sustaining power to us. However Jude says he is *able*, not he *will* (without any further condition). A simple distinction.

12. *For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the first born among many brethren; and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified* (Romans 8:29-30).

How we understand this passage depends much on the word '*predestined*'. If we understand it to mean God causes certain people to be called, justified and glorified independent of their will, while others are decreed to destruction, also independent of their will, then we can be led to believe there is basis for unconditional eternal salvation. However this raises the question of God's justice in predestining people to destruction. Nowhere in Scripture do we read that God causes us to believe and obey or disbelieve and disobey him. Scripture, from Genesis to Revelation, consistently shows moral choices are our responsibility. So we should be cautious of going beyond what Scripture actually says. Nor can we say we are known by God and continue in sin as Paul reminds Timothy:

Nevertheless, the firm foundation of God stands, having this seal, "The Lord knows those who are His," and, "Everyone who names the name of the Lord is to abstain from wickedness" (2 Timothy 2:19).

And as Paul says it those who love God who are known by him:

But if anyone loves God, he is known by Him (1 Corinthians 8:3).

Who is predestined is God's knowledge, not ours. What we do know though, it is God's will that none perish, that all come to repentance, be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth. Hence predestination does not dispense of our responsibility to obey God.

God's calling, justifying and glorifying us are by his power and grace. Yet his choice and our choice are two facts which need to be kept in balance. Throughout scripture our responsibility to make moral choices is plainly stated. As Peter says:

Therefore, brethren, be all the more diligent to make certain about His calling and choosing you; for as long as you practice these things, you will never stumble; for in this way the entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ will be abundantly supplied to you (2 Peter 1:10,11).

If we are unconditionally, eternally secure, why would we be urged to make our calling and election certain? Our calling and choosing are made certain, as this scripture shows, is as we practice those things: upon faith we build moral excellence, perseverance, love, etc. (see v 5-7). In the book of Revelation we read it is the called and chosen and faithful who are with Christ (17:14). God calls and chooses, but we need to be faithful.

Vessels of Honour

In Romans Paul tells us about God's vessels of honour and vessels of wrath. Paul says God endured with *much patience* those vessels of wrath prepared for destruction (Romans 9:21-23). So his wrath is not arbitrary, but gives all the opportunity to repent. We are all vessels, our bodies and minds made in the image of God, but how these vessels are used depends on our willingness to obey him:

Now in a large house there are not only gold and silver vessels, but also vessels of wood and of earthenware, and some to honour and some to dishonour. Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from these things, he will be a vessel for honour, sanctified, useful to the Master, prepared for every good work (2 Timothy 2:20,21).

So it is as we exercise our choice in cleansing ourselves of these things (sins) we are made vessels of honour for God. We choose whether to be a vessel of obedience or a vessel of disobedience. Even then, God works through our obedience not because of it.

In the garden of Gethsemane, God's will and free will in the person of Jesus operated together. While God had pre-determined from the beginning what would happen, Jesus showed by submitting his will to the Father's, God's will would be fulfilled:

Father, if You are willing, remove this cup from Me; yet not My will, but Yours be done (Luke 22:42).

So God's choice and our freedom of choice operate together, even though we may not understand how. While we are on this Earth it may have to remain a mystery. What is certain though, we are free to choose, but the choice we make has eternal consequences.

13. *They went out from us, but they were not really of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but they*

went out, so that it would be shown that they all are not of us (1 John 2.19).

Some understand this scripture to mean true Christians will remain and persevere. Those who leave the church and the Faith show they were not saved and true Christians in the first place. However the context indicates John is referring to '*antichrists*', that is substitute or false Christs. There has been and will be false brethren and false Christs but Jesus said by their fruit we would know them.

14. *If any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire* (1 Corinthians 3:15).

This verse is used to show that a Christian who goes on to live a sinful life can suffer loss of reward but still be finally saved. Yet the context shows that the work Paul is referring to is the work of service, spreading the gospel and building the church, not sin. It is the *quality* of the work that is being tested by fire (see v13).

In this next section we look at some of the general arguments foundational to the '*once saved always saved*' teaching.

Unconditional salvation and assured perseverance?

I understand there are two views of '*once saved always saved*'.

1. The first view says that once a person has expressed faith in Christ for the forgiveness of their sins, they are saved and secure for all eternity regardless of their subsequent life and behaviour.

2. The second view holds that those who believed and were saved *will* persevere in holy living (and if need be with God's discipline) and so be eternally saved. This is also known as '*the perseverance of the saints*'. Those who don't persevere in holy living show they did not truly believe in the first place. This view may also include the possibility of some measure of backsliding with the result of loss of reward, but not eternal salvation.

Though differing in detail these two views have one idea in common: that once the Christian life has started, it will inevitably end in glory. Both views have the understanding or assumption, that salvation is complete once it has begun. Yet, as we saw earlier, though Israel was saved from Egypt, most did not enter the Promised Land because of their unbelief and disobedience.

The fate of those Israelites serves as an example and warning to us today. It is not a question of salvation being lost but rather whether it has been *in vain* if we also, like the Israelites, go on to live in unbelief and disobedience. Salvation is not 'lost' but rather we can become *disqualified* (1 Corinthians 9:27) and not inherit God's kingdom (see '*Saved To Be Holy and Righteous*' p 57). The author of Hebrews warned that our great salvation can be neglected to the point of incurring God's judgement (Hebrews 2:2-3). It is not a question of God's grace being insufficient but rather whether his grace can be spurned or insulted (as the writer to the Hebrews also warned).

As mentioned earlier, Jude also warned of the grave error of thinking God's grace gives us an excuse to live an immoral life. (Jude 4).

Other scriptures, such as Romans 5:10, 13:11, and 1 Timothy 4:16 show of our future salvation which is conditional on continued faith and obedience.

The second view says those who have been truly saved *will* inevitably persevere, but this is not consistent to the whole of scripture since:

1. Scripture does not speak of *true* belief or faith but of the need to *continue* in faith. Jesus' parable of the sower shows that it is possible to believe for a while but in a time of testing fall away (Luke 8:13).

2. This view puts all the responsibility of a believer's persevering to God, whereas scripture contains numerous

encouragements for *us* to persevere (Matthew 10:27 and 24:13), to be diligent, remain in him, test ourselves, fight the good fight, hold fast, endure suffering, pursue peace, love, righteousness and holiness, purify ourselves and overcome. In other words God will not do for us what we should do ourselves.

3. Jesus said it is those who endure to the end, who finally persevere who will be saved (Mark 13:13). Yet we always need to remember it is God who enables us to persevere through his strength. We merely trust and obey.

4. It places an undue emphasis on a past event when so much of Scripture urges us to keep the faith, persevere and look forward to the hope before us.

The terms salvation, justification, redemption, forgiveness, sanctification and entering God's kingdom, though of course related, are all different aspects of God's salvation for us. Scripture consistently shows we are justified through faith and saved by grace but our inheritance in the kingdom of God is conditional on what we do. '*Once saved, always saved*' is partially true in the sense that once we have been saved, we are saved, but scripture also tells us of salvation that is yet future:

Besides this you know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed (Romans 13:11 ESV) and

So Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him (Hebrews 9:28 ESV).

So it still remains for us to persevere in the faith and so be finally saved and inherit God's kingdom.

The Carnal Christian

Another term encountered is '*the carnal Christian*'. The carnal Christian is someone who continues in sin but will, according to

some, still enter God's kingdom. The problem with such a Christian is that while he has believed in Christ for forgiveness of his sins he has not believed Christ for his *death to sin*. A carnal Christian is in fact an *immature* Christian, a babe in Christ. (as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 3:1) He may have been *saved*, but he is not *safe* if he wilfully continues in that state. '*Once saved always saved*', rightly emphasises God's grace and our forgiveness of sins in Christ, does not give enough significance of our death to sin, also in Christ.

As pointed out earlier, the most serious problem with '*once saved always saved*' is that it effectively weakens or even destroys the fear of God. For if we think "*I know this is not right but God will still finally save me*" we are in effect putting God to the test. Jesus rebuked Satan for such a suggestion when he was tempted in the wilderness (Matthew 4:5-7). It also weakens our spiritual armour, for we are told to '*put on the breastplate of righteousness*' (Ephesians 6:14). This is the righteousness we do, not to be confused with the righteousness of Christ which we receive through faith.

To assure someone that they are eternally secure even though we know they are practising sin is to deceive them. We should note well the words of the apostle John:

Make sure no one deceives you; the one who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous; the one who practices sin is of the devil (1 John 3:7,8).

The fact many who believe 'once saved always saved' are holy and righteous people does not mean these concerns are unimportant. They are righteous because it is the fruit of the Holy Spirit who dwells in them. However, I suggest there will be a conflict between what the Holy Spirit says and what the mind believes.

It may be argued that those who have truly believed but backslide will be disciplined by God so they will learn to

persevere. But how do we know if we have 'truly believed'? True belief will be shown by the fruit of the Spirit in our life: *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control* - fruit which remains (Galatians 5:22-23 and John 15:16). God's discipline does not guarantee we will persevere, but only as we humble ourselves, submit to him and produce the fruit of righteousness. God's loving discipline is for our good that we may share his holiness (Hebrews 12:5-11).

Conclusion

God's promises and election of those who will inherit his kingdom must always be held together with the plain warnings of Scripture. Some have suggested these warnings are hypothetical so as to motivate believers to persevere. But this is effectively accusing the New Testament writers of stating what is not true. Surely the plain meaning is that there is a serious consequence if these warnings are not heeded. The wisest path therefore is to humbly take these warnings seriously.

Assurance

Living for Jesus in this world will, at times, be difficult but we have much to assure and comfort us. God does not expect us to do what we can't and gives us both the opportunity and power to do his will. Jesus will be with us to the very end:

I am with you always, even to the end of the age (Matthew 28:20).

1. True assurance is based on Christ and our faith in him.

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen (Hebrews 11:1).

This hope is a certainty, though not yet realised, but made real through faith. The assurance of God's promises comes as we serve Christ with faith and patience:

For God is not unjust so as to forget your work and the love which you have shown toward His name, in having ministered and in still ministering to the saints. And we desire that each one of you show the same diligence so as to realise the full assurance of hope until the end, so that you will not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises (Hebrews 6:10-12).

2. When Christ was crucified our old self was crucified with him.

Through the death of Christ sin no longer has power over us. We have become a new creation and God lives in us by his Spirit. We may not at times feel our sin nature is dead but let's believe God, not our feelings. Do you believe you are forgiven your sins? Then believe you are also dead to sin. Both are true because God has said so. This is faith in action.

3. Our conscience bears witness

We may feel disheartened and guilty because of our lack of growth in Christ. We may even question whether we have been

saved. But take heart. If we still sense inner conflict and guilt it is an indication of the battle between the old and new self. Since you first repented of your sins and put your faith in Christ have you experienced a power beyond yourself to overcome sin? Are you growing in faith, moral virtue, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, love for your brothers and sisters in Christ and *agape* love? If so then you can be assured you have been born of God's Spirit.

4. There is no temptation that is too great to bear.

God promises to give us a way out of a temptation so that we might not sin (1 Corinthians 10:13). True there may be times when it may seem too great to bear - but at such times God is testing our faith in him. It is all part of his training us to be holy. As John encourages us:

My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous (1 John 2:1).

And there is forgiveness:

If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9).

Provided we also forgive those who have sinned against us (Matthew 6:14,15).

5. Satan has no authority over those born of God:

We know that everyone who has been born of God does not sin, but the One who is born of God keeps him, and the evil one does not touch him (1 John 5:18).

Therefore we should have no fear of Satan since Jesus keeps us in his power. Satan may tempt, hinder or deceive but cannot make us sin.

And Paul encourages us with these words:

But the Lord is faithful, and He will strengthen and protect you from the evil one (2 Thessalonians 3:3).

6. We have the inner witness of the Holy Spirit with our spirit that we are God's children:

For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, "Abba! Father!" The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God (Romans 8:15,16).

7. We can be assured and confident before God:

Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth. By this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our heart before him for whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything. Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God and whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him (1 John 3:18-22 ESV).

As we forsake sin and do what is right we will have a clean conscience and assurance. However, continuing in sin hardens our heart and dulls our conscience.

8. Jesus promises those who follow him:

Come to Me all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light (Matthew 11:28-30).

Jesus has reconciled us to God and accomplished what we couldn't. Therefore we can have rest within our soul. When we come to Jesus and follow him, we will have his burden but one that is bearable.

9. It is God's will that none of us fall.

God does not demand of us anything which he does not give the grace and power to perform, for in Christ he has:

Blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ (Ephesians 1:3).

And he gives us strength because it is he who works in us:

That He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man (Ephesians 3:16).

Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us (Ephesians 3:20).

For it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure (Philippians 2:13).

And Jesus intercedes for us:

Christ Jesus...who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us (Romans 8:34).

Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them (Hebrews 7:25).

So we are never left with a burden too great to bear but can receive mercy and grace in times of need:

Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need (Hebrews 4:16).

In times of suffering we are encouraged with these words:

After you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish you (1 Peter 5:10).

We can always be assured of God's power to keep us:

Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to make you stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy (Jude 24).

10. As we pray according to God's will, he hears us:

This is the confidence which we have before Him, that, if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us (1 John 5:14).

This ought to give us much assurance - God is listening to our prayers and wants to answer them.

11. Not only does God give us assurance but he also gives us peace and joy:

These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world (John 16:33).

Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus (Philippians 4:6,7).

We can expect trouble in this life in our battle against the world, the flesh and the devil. But this does not mean we have to live in a state of anxiety and joylessness. On the contrary, inner peace and joy will be a reality when we put our hope and trust in Jesus and give thanks to God in whatever circumstances we find ourselves in. The old saying '*Count your blessings*' is sound advice. There is always a reason to thank God.

Jesus told us that true joy is ours when we keep his promises in mind:

These things I have spoken to you so that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full (John 15:11).

And James encourages us that even during times of trial we can have joy:

Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing (James 1:2-3).

The end result of enduring suffering with inner joy is we grow in spiritual maturity.

As Paul in his letter to the Philippians encourages us with these words:

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice! (Philippians 4:4).

12. *If God is for us, who can be against us*?

These words of Paul, again, should give us every assurance, and as he goes on to say:

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered." No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:31; 35-39 ESV).

For those who love God, affliction and the powers of darkness or of man cannot prevent us from being finally victorious through the love of God which is in Christ.

13. We should always be assured of God's love for us:

See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we would be called children of God; and such we are (1 John 3:1).

He cares and values us as his own children, as an individual not just one of a number (Luke 12:6,7).

God has no pleasure in anyone perishing. He wants all to come to repentance and be saved. Like the anguish of a parent who has lost a child and the joy when reunited with them, so our Father in Heaven rejoices over every sinner who returns and repents.

Many times in the Psalms we are assured of God's preservation and love for us:

The LORD preserves the faithful but abundantly repays the one who acts in pride (Psalm 31:23 ESV).

For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His lovingkindness toward those who fear Him (Psalm 103:11).

14. And this amazing vision of John as he saw the New Jerusalem, the city of God:

And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them, and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away" (Revelation 21:2-4).

Such a promise ought to fill us with with great hope and assurance.

Having such assurances should never lead us to be complacent. We should always maintain a humble and thankful attitude. Though we may stumble, provided we repent, get up and continue we will have assurance. Then, on that final day, we will hear those words of Jesus "*Well done good and faithful servant...enter into the joy of your master.*"

Growing In Christ

In Christ we have been given all that is sufficient to be the people God desires so we need never lose heart. We can therefore look with hope and confidence to a future glory beyond our comprehension.

Salvation is a journey which begins when we believe in Christ. It is a journey along a narrow, and at times, difficult path. By God's grace and strength, through continued faith and perseverance we will finally enter his kingdom and final rest and to him will be the glory.

Further reading

Murray, Andrew *Like Christ*

Nee, Watchman *The Normal Christian Life*

Pawson, David *The Normal Christian Birth*

Once Saved Always Saved?

Pink, A.W. *Profiting From the Word*

Ryle, J.C. *Holiness*

Bailey, Alan *The Role of a Christian Man*

Man and Woman According To Scripture:
https://preparefortribulation.com/man-and-woman-in-the-church/

Christians and Divorce: My personal journey through divorce and offering Biblical and practical advice:

https://christiansanddivorce.com